

# FESTIVAL OF THE GARGOYLES



Robert Hallmann



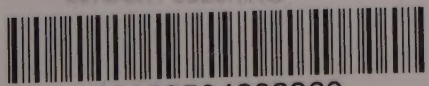
2015

14 APR 2018

# FESTIVAL OF THE GARGOYLES

By  
Robert Hallmann

Illustrated by  
David Hurrell



30130504802960

*I would like to say a hearty thank you to Karen Bowman,  
who has been enthusiastically helping with fashion notions  
and vernacular turns of phrase.*

Text copyright @ 2012 Robert Hallmann  
Illustrations copyright @ 2012 David Hurrell

The right of Robert Hallmann and David Hurrell to be identified as the Author and  
Illustrator respectively of this work has been asserted in accordance with the  
Copyrights, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any  
form or by any electronic, mechanic or other means, now known or hereafter invented,  
including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system,  
without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the Publishers.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-9570635-1-8

Printed in the United Kingdom

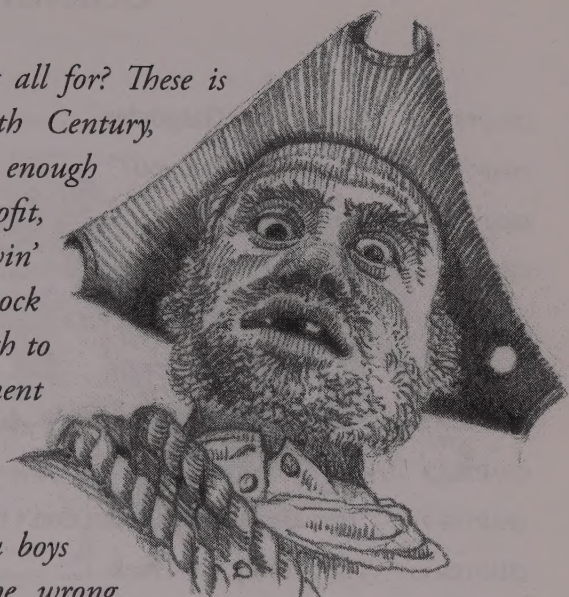
First published 2012 by Estuary Publishing  
[www.estuarypublishing.co.uk](http://www.estuarypublishing.co.uk)

For Minna and Theo,  
and children everywhere





“*Schoolin’, what’s it all for? These is modern times, the 18th Century, an’ as long as you know enough numbers to count up a profit, you’ll get by. That an’ knowin’ how to crew a fast ship, cock a pistol an’ be fast enough to outrun them government inspectors... may they all die with their boots on!*



*Will schoolin’ stop you boys from findin’ yourself the wrong end of a gun or be tricked into a life working at sea? I dare say, not. You ought join me! Smagge’s the name, an’ a smugglin’s my game. Aye, a ship full of smuggled brandy an’ lace and packets of that highfalutin’ India tea, now that’s worth a studyin’.*

*That’s all the schoolin’ you need ‘til you be fat and rich and tellin’ tales of your adventures to your children when you’re grown up. Them’s the tales that’ll keep you warm by the fire; them and the ones about gargoyles and ghosts, the dangers of the moonlit salt marshes and the evil doings of men in crooked lanes and smoky ale-houses. What more can a boy need? Not learnin’, that’s for sure.*

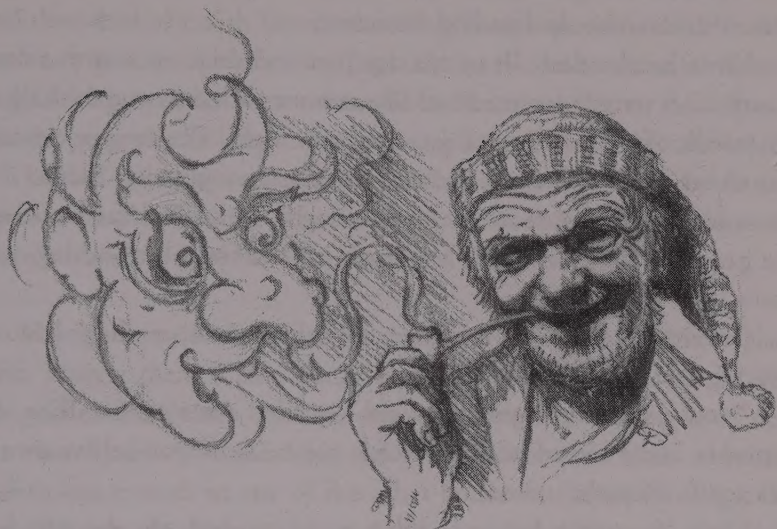
*And as for girls... now what, by Jimminy, would a girl want with schoolin’? All you needs to know you can get from your ma’.*

*Besides, girls with schoolin’ can be... dangerous.”*

# Contents

CHAPTER 1	Night of the Gargoyles .....	7
CHAPTER 2	“Father? Is that you?” .....	13
CHAPTER 3	Spotty’s Arrival .....	17
CHAPTER 4	Lizzie’s Lucky Escape .....	22
CHAPTER 5	The Silent Boy .....	29
CHAPTER 6	Toy Fair on the Green .....	35
CHAPTER 7	The Monster from the Sky .....	41
CHAPTER 8	The Keeper of Owls .....	46
CHAPTER 9	“Beware the Ropes! But don’t be afraid.” .....	51
CHAPTER 10	The Mill by the Creek .....	57
CHAPTER 11	Ghosts of the Marshes .....	63
CHAPTER 12	The Brimstone Saltings Mystery .....	67
CHAPTER 13	“Heart of Oak are our Ships.” .....	71
CHAPTER 14	“The King needs men like you!” .....	79
CHAPTER 15	Bell Tower Silence .....	84
CHAPTER 16	The Grim Visitor .....	89
CHAPTER 17	A Ship from the Indies .....	92
CHAPTER 18	“Does that mean you have no soul?” .....	100
CHAPTER 19	Lizzie’s Prison .....	105
CHAPTER 20	Dangerous Accusations .....	111
CHAPTER 21	“Just make for Brimstone Saltings!” .....	113
CHAPTER 22	A Message! From Lizzie? .....	118
CHAPTER 23	“Swim the Witch!” .....	125
CHAPTER 24	A Rude Awakening .....	131
CHAPTER 25	Fire on the Marsh .....	138





## CHAPTER 1

# Night of the Gargoyles

Lizzie was both spellbound and scared by his stories. Uncle Jonah had a wrinkled face and few teeth, but his tales knew no limits. Nor did all those demons, ghouls and gargoyles that he conjured up. His eyes twinkled by the light of the flames in the large, open fireplace.

"Of course, gargoyles are not always stuck up there, high on the church walls. On All Hallows' Eve they come down and fraternise." He emphasised the last word so it sounded dangerous and wicked. "Do you know what that means?"

Lizzie shook her head so quickly that curls of her long auburn hair escaped from under her plain linen mop cap and fell across her face.

"No, I don't know."

"Well, that's when they go a-gatherin'," he winked, "banding together, when they come slidin' or a-slitherin' down from their usual places. I saw this sciapod once..."



"What is a sciapod?" interrupted Lizzie timidly. Her hazel eyes, open wide with fear, already dreading the answer.

Uncle Jonah calmly lit up his clay pipe and drew on it with a deep breath. "It is a mythological dwarf-like creature with only one thick leg in the middle of its body. I saw it late one rainy night. This strange creature was sitting out in the open, sheltering under its single huge foot as if it was a large umbrella. Gave me quite a fright, it did. But far worse are the gargoyles, and they don't have such large mouths for nothing, you know."

Only candles and the crackling fire lit the room, sending shadows dancing over the walls.

"Now don't you frighten the girl," scolded Aunt Hilda. Then she turned to Lizzie and added with a softer voice: "Don't you believe a word he's sayin', sciapods, indeed!"

Lizzie sat quietly. Sciapods didn't sound too bad, she thought, but gargoyles were real. Lizzie had seen the hideous creatures staring down from their high places under the church roof with their mouths open whenever she passed through the churchyard. *Perhaps they were screaming silently? Or maybe they were just hungry?* She shivered at the thought.

"You know," her uncle continued, "the only time their mouths are closed is on All Hallows' Eve, what some folk call the Festival of the Gargoyles! Because that's when the gargoyles are free to roam. But I don't want to frighten you, so I won't tell you who or what they're dining on. It's only bad children need to worry."

He took another puff on his pipe and rubbed his bristly chin. "But their eyesight is none too good, and sometimes they make mistakes. Just promise me one thing: never go out on All Hallows' Eve. Ever!"

"Shame on you, Jonah! Don't listen to him, Lizzie," laughed her aunt. "Those gargoyles are made of stone and there to frighten off evil spirits, nothing else."

"Don't worry, Lizzie," that's what her mother had said whenever they walked past them through the churchyard. "You're quite safe with me."

She had been happiest snuggled up close to her mother. She always



felt safe in her mother's soft arms. But all too quickly her mother fell ill and then died of marsh fever, a dreadful illness that claimed the lives of too many good people of their village. Lizzie cried and cried at her funeral and as she prayed for her mother, she looked up to heaven for help and saw the gargoyles looking at her, grinning brazenly with open mouths.

Lizzie's father was away at sea, so it was decided after the funeral that she should live with her aunt and uncle in their cottage behind the church – at least until her father returned.

On the days she visited her mother's grave with Aunt Hilda to place fresh flowers there, Lizzie made sure she always walked on the side away from the sinister creatures above her, and she never played near the churchyard. *Who was right, her aunt or her uncle?* Even when she had to run errands to any of the other houses in the small village, she wouldn't take the short cut through the churchyard. Instead, she would take the muddy paths at the edge of the village, trying the patience of Aunt Hilda.

"Lizzie, you must be more ladylike. How am I supposed to get your hems clean? Heavens, I am too busy to spend one more minute than needs be down at the river beating the dirt out of that lace on your petticoat. If only you didn't go a-runnin' about all over the place with your skirts hitched."

Lizzie smiled to herself. Running was second nature to her – the wind in her face and grass beneath her feet. But she would always quickly smooth her skirt down and cover the wayward petticoat to appear respectable when meeting people in the street. Especially the Squire, who was the most important man in the village.

Autumn came, and the trees stood like skeletons without their leaves. It meant Lizzie could clearly see the ugliest of the gargoyles on the church roof from her window. They always seemed to grin just at her – as if they were waiting for something. Remembering Uncle Jonah's warning, Lizzie tried to be good. She felt more alone than ever since her mother died. When would her father return from the sea?





All Hallows' Eve came and Lizzie couldn't stop thinking about it. *When would the Festival of the Gargoyles begin?* But Uncle Jonah was gone all day to a market.

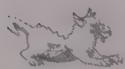
In the evening a church bell rang. Aunt Hilda hurried herself. "I'm going to evensong," she announced to Lizzie. "You can stay here, since it's such a foul night. I'm always happier when someone looks after the house. Will you look after it for me, Lizzie?"

Lizzie would have preferred her aunt to stay with her. She didn't like being alone in the house. Wind howled, and rain drove into the house as her aunt left, clasping her prayer book and shawl close to her chin. Lizzie pushed the door closed behind her. She tried to think of better times with her mother and father, when she had chased butterflies in the meadow close to their home. Then she told herself she was older now and not afraid of childish stories. But that brought her mind back to gargoyles. Oh, where was her father? He would know what to do.

The old house creaked under the storm, but at least it was warm in the room. The wind rattled the windows – like someone trying to get in. Lizzie placed another log on the fire so that the dancing flames would make the room brighter. She found her favourite book and tried to shut out the outside world.

All at once the room was as bright as day. For a long moment afterwards Lizzie was blinded. Almost instantly thunder burst overhead with a frightening sound. *Lightning*, shivered Lizzie. She was tempted to hide under the table, but she told herself she must be strong. The thunder roared and then all was quiet again. She had to look after the house. Just like a grown-up. Again lightning struck, not as blinding as before, and the thunder, which followed moments later, was not quite as loud. *It's moving away*, thought Lizzie with relief.

Another thought struck Lizzie. *The gargoyles!* Were they still up there under the church roof or had the lightning chased them away? It was no use hiding. Gathering all her courage, she decided to look for herself. Slowly and quietly she climbed the stairs to her room under the eaves. The candle almost melted in her faltering hot little hand.





Placing the candle into the holder, she crept to her window. Sheets of rain pelted against the small panes and streaming rivers of water distorted the view. Distant lightning lit up the scene for a short moment and there was no mistake – the gargoyles were still up there on the church. Lizzie breathed a sigh of relief. Then something else caught her eye.

For one instant she dismissed it as faraway lightning. But this was different – this was a slow, steady glow, completely unlike the brilliant flashes of lightning. Lizzie stuck her nose closer to the windowpane and peered out through the gloom. Tongues of flame flickered about the thatched stables near the Manor Hall - the Squire's house. She could just see it near the stables. The stables! That huge flash of lightning must have set the stables alight.

Lizzie forgot her initial fears. Now a different worry consumed her – the Squire's beautiful horses and his cattle and dogs. They'd all be in danger! She opened the small window a little and listened. Immediately, the wind drove rain in her face, but there were no other sounds. *Yes, there were!* She could hear voices in the church singing between gusts of wind. Was everyone in church? Perhaps there was nobody at the Squire's house!

She grabbed the candle and ran downstairs as fast as she could. There, she blew out the candle. A quick glance convinced her that her own fire was safely contained in the hearth behind the fire-guard and without further thought she ran out into the rain and wind, forgetting to put on her high lace-up boots. She was forced to lean into the wind and staying on her feet was difficult, but she knew the way. Passing through the lych gate to the churchyard, she stopped. Her feet refused to move.

*The gargoyles!* She had forgotten the gargoyles. She forced herself to look up through the blinding rain. Lightning lit the scene. The thunderstorm was coming back. Lizzie noticed a movement along the wall. A hideous hunchbacked beast was slithering down to the churchyard. Then another. And another. All those crouched creatures came lurching and hopping, slithering and slip-sliding from their vantage points.

Lizzie could feel her heart beating in her throat, and still her feet refused to move.

Between the lichen covered gravestones they came ever closer, moving toward her, the reflected light from the tall church windows glistening on their backs. The goat with the curved horn on its nose, the monkey with two heads, the dragon with claws on its wings – all with their horrible mouths open. The dog with fangs was slime-slobbering so much that its tongue was dragging on the ground, leaving a silvery trail. They seemed to be everywhere, moving in the shadows.

Lizzie could hear their awful groaning sounds. She wanted to turn and run. And scream. But she couldn't. Then she remembered the fire, the animals! *The animals will die!*

Another flash of lightning lit up the churchyard with a blinding light. For a moment, she could see into the saliva-dripping mouths of the gargoyles. But she noticed something else, too. The gargoyles were trying to move in the shadows, cowering from the light, squirming under the brightness, cringing as if afraid and trying to hide.

This was her chance. With all her courage, she threw herself toward them, treading on the slimy, cold, lichen encrusted back of the nearest one.

She never knew how she found the strength, but one moment she was fretting at the lych gate, and the next she was squeezing through between the gravestones and knocking frantically on the heavy church door. Behind her the gargoyles hissed and spewed water at her, angry that they had been too surprised by her sudden decision and courage.

Agonising moments later someone opened the creaking door. Breathless, all Lizzie could stammer, was: "Fire! The Squire's stables! The animals!" She whirled around to see if the gargoyles were following her, but the churchyard was empty – not a gargoyle was to be seen. In her terror and confusion she staggered forward and collapsed on the cold stone floor of the church.

# “Father? Is that you?”

Lizzie woke dry and warm and tucked up in her bed. Her aunt stood by her side with a cup of hot milk and honey.

“Here, drink this, Elizabeth. We don’t want our little heroine to catch her death before the Squire and all the village have a chance to thank her. The fire’s out. Thanks to your warning, everyone is safe. Oh, and I have more good news for you. Look who turned up just in time to help douse the barn!”

Lizzie sat up, wide awake now. For a moment she could not believe her eyes. Behind her aunt, in the shadows, stood a large man.

“Father? Is that you?”

“Lizzie, dear Lizzie!” Her father sat down at the edge of her bed and she threw her arms around him.

“Father, what? How...?” For a moment Lizzie was lost in happiness, the feel of her father’s strong arms, the smell of the rain and the sea-salt in his clothes, the leather of his coat. She had so many questions that she didn’t know where to start. “Oh, Father, you came back,” she cried, as her tears flowed freely. Her father also wiped his eyes.

They sat like that, quietly, for ages, just hugging each other. Then her father stood up again and smiled: “I need to get out of these wet clothes. There is so much to tell, but it will keep ‘til the morning. You have a good rest. I’m not going away again.” Then he added, as if he could not believe all that had happened: “How did you know the church spire was about to collapse in the storm and do such damage to the church roof? You know it knocked down many of the old gargoyles. Thanks to you, no one was hurt, since everyone had left the church to fight the fire. I’m so proud of my brave girl.”

Lizzie bit her lip, suddenly deep in thought: *Oh, dear, maybe that’s why the gargoyles came down from the gutters?*



Christmas was quiet that year, both sad and happy. It was the first Christmas without Lizzie's mother and she felt the loss particularly sharply when Aunt Hilda placed the large festive goose on the table, and saw her mother's place was empty. Memories had a habit of coming to the fore when Lizzie least expected them, but at least her father was back and the adults conspired to make it as happy an occasion as their own loss and sadness would allow.

Uncle Jonah had been quietly busy with his carving knives and presented Lizzie with a small-scale zoo, or rather an ark. The animals came in two by two, together with Noah and his sons and their wives and some of the weirdest creatures anyone might have thought of and that never made it into the ark. Lizzie recognised one that sheltered under its single large foot. Uncle Jonah would probably have a story for every one of them.

The new year brought a dramatic change – Lizzie was to start school. Normally only boys of the village went to school and most of them only when they could be spared at home. But it was on the orders of the grateful Squire, in recognition of her 'prompt and brave action' that she was given a place. Lizzie and her father accompanied the Squire to the school and heard him instruct the village schoolmaster to 'find our most courageous and worthy Elizabeth Masters a place at your educational establishment and afford her the merit of your knowledge on all things historical, mathematical, scientific and musical; not of course forgetting Latin, the language of scholars and gentlefolk.'

Lizzie had glowed with pride at her inclusion at school, but she was not welcomed by the boys. They didn't like having a girl in school and they teased and poked fun at her mercilessly. However, as in most things, Lizzie was ahead of them. She annoyed them greatly by not answering their silly taunts, and eventually even the biggest of the boys gave up. School suited Lizzie fine, and she soaked up knowledge like the sponges her father had brought back from one of his long trips.

Ever since the church tower had been damaged, the children had to climb their way among mortar and scaffolding to get to the small





schoolroom, which was still intact above the south porch of the church. Like the boys, Lizzie had to watch her step, but she had to be especially careful, as her new long skirt and petticoats meant that she was more likely to trip up on the narrow winding stairs. But as sure-footed as the woodland animals she loved, Lizzie would simply hitch up her skirt and clean white apron and smooth them down again when she reached her desk ready to recite morning prayers.

And as the children studied, the workmen were repairing the gargoyles outside their windows that had been damaged in the storm.

Lizzie and her father couldn't stay at Aunt Hilda's house forever and with the arrival of spring they moved back to their old home by the estuary. Everything there reminded Lizzie of her mother and it was difficult at first for her to settle. She remembered how she had promised her dying mother she would look after her father and she tried to take over some of her mother's jobs as best she could, learning by her own mistakes and asking Aunt Hilda for advice if necessary. She had become quite a good cook in spite of her age. Luckily she liked to cook. There was always a lot of work to do.

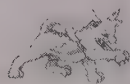


She loved their small wooden cottage, which was built of wattle and daub. It stood on the edge of the windswept estuary, where the river widened and mingled with the sea, and had withstood many a storm. The old beams in the cottage often creaked, but inside it was snug and warm. They were a happy pair, Lizzie and her father, helping each other as much as they could, both with work and with their memories. But all too often her father's new job would take him away, sometimes for days at a time, and then it was too dangerous for Lizzie to stay alone in the little thatched cottage. As much as she insisted that she was a big girl now, the adults thought it was safer for her to stay with her aunt and uncle.

On such days, she would stop by her home and visit her donkey after school to be sure all was well. Her father had bought her the donkey and also a small cart, in which she could travel and run errands. The donkey lived in a meadow close to the cottage and would return at night to a lean-to stable at the back, which it shared with her father's horse.

Lizzie's father was a revenue man now, working for the government, collecting taxes on imported goods. She became aware of the secrecy that surrounded him. There was much he could not talk about. He spent long days and nights away on the coast in pursuit of smugglers, who would go to any length to avoid paying taxes. Lizzie soon learned not to ask where he was going, though she had heard enough stories of desperate smugglers to know it was a dangerous job upholding the law.

Even in her own village of Oysterfleet there were many who made a mysterious living, which was probably down to smuggling. Quietly, Lizzie worried for her father as she had heard how determined, clever and murderous the smugglers could be, and that men in her father's job often did not last long in their posts. But she knew it would not help her father to show him that she was afraid. She would not let him worry about her as well. Her mother would have wanted her to be brave and because Lizzie had loved her mother so much, she was determined to be so.



# Spotty's Arrival

**I**t was the middle of May and hawthorn petals dropped from the hedges like snow. The Squire had ordered one of the farmhands to clear a meadow of long grass to establish a new area for an orchard. As the man used his scythe in large sweeps, the tip of his tool met an obstacle. He quickly discovered a young fallow deer. The animal was only hours old and was cowering close to the ground, absolutely still. Now discovered, it tried to struggle to escape on its spindly, wobbly, unsteady legs, but fell over again. The farmhand caught it, noticing a bleeding wound on its hind leg.



Quickly, he scooped the shaking animal in his arms and started back towards the Squire's house. After all, everything in and on the Squire's lands belonged to the Squire. Without attention the spotted yellowish-brown deer would die of the wound, if the wolves and foxes did not get it first. The man passed through the village just as the school day was ending.



The school boys surrounded the rough, good-natured fellow carrying the shaking creature like the good shepherd in one of the stained glass windows of the church. They taunted him: "Oh, give it to us, mister, can we have it? It's only little, and only a morsel for the Squire." The tallest and boldest of the boys followed the man almost up to the Squire's yard: "My father likes a good stew," he said, "and so do all nine of us. We could have it for Sunday lunch."

Lizzie had not taken part in the taunting, but followed quietly all the same. She felt sorry for the little deer, whose eyes were open large with fright and whose heart was beating so fast, you could see it hammering. She made a sudden daring decision and acted before she could regret it. Running past the others, she overtook the man and stopped in front of him, so he could not ignore her. "Excuse me, please," she said politely, but in a determined voice. "What will happen to the little deer?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the man, "that's up to the Squire. It's his to do with as he pleases. But I shouldn't think it'll see tomorrow. Not with its wound an' all, and its mother shot only this mornin'." Lizzie knew it wasn't her place to ask and this was none of her business, but she could not let it rest.

The other children stood in the road with their mouths wide open in astonishment at her audacity. Lizzie was risking her place at the school and some hoped she would lose it. The Squire's decision to allow her to join the boys' school had annoyed many among the villagers. Lizzie only wanted to save the deer, and hoped the Squire would remember his promise to grant her a wish.

She could hear dogs barking and the Squire shouting in the yard even before she saw him. *Oh*, she thought, *he's in a bad mood*. The farmhand dutifully stepped around Lizzie to hand over the deer to the bailiff, the farm manager, who was in charge on behalf of the Squire, explaining that he had found it in the long meadow and how it came to be wounded.

Lizzie walked past them towards the Squire, but before she could get close to him two large wolfhounds barred her way, snarling.

"Hey, where do you think you are going, my girl?" shouted the bailiff





as he came running. He stopped abruptly and said: "Oh, it's you, young Lizzie."

The dogs were almost as tall as Lizzie and she stood stock still, making eye-to-eye contact with the nearest. His muzzle came forward and she could see his teeth, but Lizzie stared right back. The hound's breath was quick and fast and Lizzie's face went as white as a sheet, but she still did not move.

"Arch! Deacon! Stand off!" The Squire's voice boomed across the yard and the dogs relaxed and turned to their master. Reluctantly, it seemed to Lizzie.

"They're pussy cats, really," laughed the Squire, who had watched Lizzie's torment with some amusement. "You did the right thing, my dear, by not moving. They might have thought you a young deer, or a wild boar or something."

Lizzie's face was red now and her words came fast, urgent and ill-thought-out but the rotund Squire well remembered her brave deed and how he had promised her anything she wished for, as well as attending school regularly. Now she wanted that promise to be kept. She explained how she would care for the little deer. She would tend its wound, though she did not yet know how. Anything, just to save it from the kitchen. "You don't need something this small in your kitchen. Please, sir," she begged.

"A fawn, a little deer, that's all you wish for? It's wounded and probably will die anyway." The Squire stroked his sideburns and recalled the bailiff.

"Better a quick death," said the bailiff. "I'll call the cook."

Lizzie did not move. "You promised," she said to the Squire, fighting back her tears.

The Squire was impressed with Lizzie's persistence, though he was not going to show it. He wished his son up at the University had a little of her backbone. His brusque manner softened.

"If, mind you, if," he said, teasing her, "if I leave you in charge of such a small animal, there is a lot of work involved, and you cannot take



time off from school. It will need a lot of looking after. And then it will probably run away. I don't want the gamekeeper coming back with it one day."

Lizzie almost kissed his hand, she was so grateful. "I won't. I'll make it well. I promise." Hastily she scooped the little deer up in her arms, staggering under its weight.

The Squire smiled at her eagerness. *'You don't need something this small in your kitchen,'* he repeated under his breath. Then he ordered the bailiff to carry the deer to wherever Lizzie wanted to take it.

"My aunt, Hilda Chaundeler, will know what to do," Lizzie said, giving directions to her house. The bailiff scowled, but did as he was told.

Aunt Hilda welcomed Lizzie with some relief, as she was late back from school. But she was even more surprised to see the bailiff carrying a spotted young deer. There was no mistake, it was hers, Lizzie insisted, telling her story as fast as she could.

Grumpily, the bailiff handed over the frightened, shivering animal to her aunt and shuffled off, cursing under his breath about children interfering in adult things. Aunt Hilda was aghast at Lizzie's audacity. Nobody talked to the Squire like that. But the bailiff was proof of her words.

"Well," Aunt Hilda said, suddenly practical and helpful. "We'll have to see what we can do before it bleeds to death, the poor thing. And it will need some milk. It must be starving."

"It can have my milk, Aunt Hilda," gushed Lizzie. "I can eat my porridge dry. I can, I can."

Her aunt smiled. She had a way with healing and made traditional old remedies and natural potions, using herbs from her garden and wild plants she collected from the countryside. People would come to her for help if they could not afford the more modern medicines sold at the apothecary, a sort of pharmacy. But it also meant that some people were suspicious of Aunt Hilda's gift of healing, which they did not understand. Where did she get that knowledge, they would say, if not from the devil?

Some people even suspected her of being a witch.

It did not take Aunt Hilda long to stem the trickle of blood and clean and bind the deer's wound. Then she found an old leather glove and put a small hole in the end of the thumb, filling it with milk. The deer was very hungry and accepted the mother substitute and suckled lustily on the leather thumb. Luckily, the next day was a holiday and Lizzie could spend one whole lovely day with her new friend. The speckled deer was very shy and lay down quietly. When somebody passed outside or it could hear a dog bark, Lizzie would cradle the deer in her arms until it stopped shaking. Then it was time for more milk.

Lizzie replaced the deer's mother quite successfully. Soon it followed her on its lanky legs. It was shy, but not with Lizzie, who would feed it from the old glove in the morning before going to school, and hurry home as quickly as she could to feed it again in the afternoon. At school, the other children talked about little else.

At first, the deer never left her side. Soon though, it began to explore around the cottage, and Lizzie had to take great pains to stop it getting into the garden and nibbling the roses and vegetables. It seemed to have a great liking for roses. As time went on, the deer grew stronger and Lizzie could leave it with the donkey in the enclosure, where they became great companions, grazing all day side by side. Lizzie would have liked to see more of her father, but did not complain, as the animals were great company for her.

Her father did try to be at home as often as he could. But he worried a great deal because catching smugglers and criminals was a dangerous job, and he had many desperate enemies.



# Lizzie's Lucky Escape

The donkey had little sense of urgency and was usually slow, and because sometimes it just would not do as it was told at all, Lizzie named it 'Stubborn'. Sometimes Lizzie and Stubborn would drive to the village if there were things to be collected and she would run errands for other people who were getting used to the curious sight of a girl on a donkey cart accompanied by a deer, running unfettered alongside them in the open countryside. The deer, which had lost its spots now but was still called 'Spotty,' would even follow her to school. Lizzie had a true friend!

One delightful late summer's evening Lizzie left her aunt's house to walk back to her cottage near the reeds accompanied by Spotty. She decided to take the long path back along the water's edge. Butterflies tumbled in the late sun and a skylark had a last fling of singing high above them. The sun was low in the sky now and preparing for the night with a spectacular display of orange and gold low on the horizon.

Out on the marshes chattering geese rose in large formations before heading to a nearby island to roost for the night. The sky was full of birds strung out like noisy garlands. Lizzie stepped a little close to the edge of the water and disturbed a coot that complained noisily as it rushed off skimming across the water's surface with frantic beats of its short wings.

"Oops, sorry," laughed Lizzie, quickly stepping back and almost knocking over the deer. As she straightened herself, she noticed something glisten at a nearby inlet. She went to investigate and discovered a small boat with two sets of oars clumsily hidden among the reeds. *How strange*, she thought, *that shouldn't be there. What could it mean?*

She had been so busy enjoying herself, she had not realised how late it had become. As she swiftly turned for home, the deer ran happily ahead of her. "Go on," Lizzie shouted, "quickly back and straight to your stable.





No trying to steal into the garden!"

Lizzie could see their cottage now and began to run. But she couldn't see any smoke curling from the chimney, so she knew her father was not yet home. Not looking ahead, she almost stumbled again into the deer, which had stopped suddenly. Its nostrils were flaring, sniffing the air, as its legs braced, and ears stood up in alarm.

"Oh," said Lizzie, breathless, "you silly goose, what's the matter? Father's not back yet and I had better start the fire for his meal. Come on!" The deer was uncertain, but with Lizzie's hand on its shoulder, it ventured forward again.

They had almost reached the cottage, when out of the corner of her eye Lizzie noticed movement on the roof. She could see something was caught in the chimney, flapping and screeching like a banshee.

The thought of gargoyles flashed through her mind, but there were no gargoyles on their roof. A devil? An imp? No, a bird. It had to be a bird. It was still screeching. Making a sudden decision Lizzie nimbly climbed the stack of wood at the back of the cottage onto the reeded roof, reaching the chimney before realising how high she was off the ground.

She stumbled and slipped, but did not look down. Grabbing for the reeds with one hand, the other reached for the creature in trouble on the chimney. She was almost there, but the feathered bundle backed away from her hand. In its panic, the bird became free and plunged, fluttering frantically, down the chimney making unearthly ear-splitting sounds.

The shock caused Lizzie to lose her balance and she tumbled back to the ground with some loud screams of her own. Luckily, she landed none the worst for wear on the soft earth, with just a few scratches and a sharp pain in her knee.

Looking about her, the deer was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Stubborn in its pen. Lizzie wondered if the garden gate had been accidentally left open. The frisky deer would quickly make the best of such a situation. She arrived at the front of the cottage only to realise that her fears were well founded. Not only had Spotty found its way into the vegetable patch, but the donkey as well.



At that precise moment the front door flew open. Amid a great cacophony of noise and surrounded by black billowing clouds, two dark figures stumbled out with horrified expressions of panic on their black smudged faces. Obviously they could not see where they were running, as soot filled their eyes. In the confusion, Stubborn reared up and kicked out front and back, catching one of the men in the side, while bellowing its cry of “eeee-ohhh, eee-ohhh” as loudly as it could. The frightened deer followed suit with one giant leap, which made the other man duck and



fall head first into a rosebush.

Lizzie ran towards them, trying to clear the animals from the garden. She had held her breath in shock as she witnessed the whole episode. The terrified ruffians were also shaken and they staggered out through the gate and ran up the lane, waving their arms and screaming.

“That was the devil himself that’s come down that chimney,” one cried out.

“An’ with half the soot of hell and a thousand demons kickin’ an



a-beatenin' us," the other shouted.

Lizzie stood there dumbstruck for a moment, not knowing whether to laugh or run for help. The front door stood open and soot was everywhere. A little afraid at first, then resolutely, Lizzie walked into the blackened house. She almost trod on her mother's much loved locket, which contained a tiny portrait of her father that an artist had made of him on one of his world wide voyages.

Now Lizzie got annoyed. The thieves! The nasty thieves! They'd been stealing her mother's things, the keepsakes that were all she had left to remember her by. She brushed at the locket – luckily it was only slightly damaged. Something else gleamed by a table leg. Lizzie bent down to pick up her father's best fobbed watch, the one he wore on a chain from his waistcoat to church on Sundays. She was pleased they hadn't taken these valuables.

The room was dark, but silent. All was eerily quiet. Soot covered the floorboards, the furniture, even the windows. Standing in the middle of the room, annoyed and defiant, her arms crossed, she wondered where to start with the long task of cleaning up. By the time her father came home on his horse, Lizzie had secured the donkey and the deer safely in the stable.

He was surprised at the damage to the garden and especially by the state of the cottage. Lizzie had done her best to start cleaning the front parlour, but when she told her story, both father and daughter had to laugh heartily.

"Ah," said her father, "that's why those villains came stumbling and screaming up the lane, blabbing that the devil and all hell were after them. I thought they were drunk and I've put them in the lock-up for the night to sober up. Now I shall have to take them to the courthouse in the morning." He hugged Lizzie and smiled broadly.

Something rustled in a dark corner of the room. Something moved. Two strange yellow eyes pierced the gloom, but did not seem to be part of a body. Lizzie's heart pounded at the thought it could be a gargoyle.

Her father put one finger to his lips: "Shhh." Then he slowly pulled

the tablecloth off the table and stretched it out between his hands. Moving quietly, he quite suddenly threw the cloth down over the sound of screeching and fluttering. One hand moved under the cloth, which he then removed and with both hands held the wings and talons close to a small body and brought it up into the light.

"Here is your mysterious devil who fell down the chimney and frightened grown men," he laughed, holding a small owlet out to her to see. Covered in soot, it looked a sorry sight. Then he added: "Oh dear, it's got a broken wing."

Lizzie hurried to find a basket and covered the small owl safely for its own protection. It soon quietened down.

"I shall call it 'Sooty'," she said. "I'll take it to Aunt Hilda in the morning. She will know how to set a broken wing."

Her aunt was concerned for Lizzie's safety when she heard the story, but kept quiet. "Setting a wing, well that is possible," she explained, "but the owlet will need help for a long while, if it ever learns to fly again."

"It will!" exclaimed Lizzie.

When Lizzie's father went to collect the villains from the village lock-up, he discovered that somebody with great determination had broken in and freed the intruders. He had to call the carpenter and the locksmith to repair the damage, and he made arrangements for Aunt Hilda to stay with them for a while. *Lizzie could be in danger on her own!* He was secretly concerned, though he did not think the villains would try anything again in a hurry.

Soon afterwards, the village was buzzing with gossip. The boys at school talked and sniggered, especially the Smagge brothers who thought it hilarious. Lizzie ignored them, but eventually she learnt the whole story. Smuggled contraband had been found in caskets, tied to a stake in Church Creek. The boys exaggerated the find and boasted it was practically a ship full of tobacco, port, brandy and fine lace from Holland. They laughed that the Squire had travelled to the Custom House and claimed 'right of wreck', as he believed that everything on or in the water belonged to him.



Lizzie's father was involved, according to the younger of the Smagge boys. Lizzie couldn't be sure whether the boys resented her father more for upholding the law, or whether they were glad the Squire had not been able to claim the find.

The teacher, Master Lazarus, happened to be late. He had been held up getting a cold remedy at the apothecary and when he entered the class the Smagge boys were still teasing Lizzie and pulling her hair.

"Stop that at once!" shouted the teacher.

"She's only a girl," answered the older Smagge, without letting go. The younger sat still as if nothing had happened. The others were stunned. They knew you never talked back at the teacher!

"Right, Joseph, come here immediately," demanded Master Lazarus, reaching for the cane he kept high on a wall and placing himself between the boy and the door. "Come here and bend over my desk." Master Lazarus had a coughing fit, though everyone knew he was serious.

The elder of the Smagge boys looked defiant and remained stubbornly in his place.

"Now, this minute!" insisted the coughing teacher, "or do I have to come to you?"

The pupils sat as if frozen. They knew what would happen.

Slowly, with eyes ablaze, but his mouth tightly shut, Joseph rose from his seat and silently walked to the desk, then bent over resignedly. The cane swished down even before he had settled. There had been no time to prepare, like placing a stiff piece of leather or bark down his breeches. The cane hurt and he pulled a face, but he did not utter a word. Again the cane came down. He winced and gnashed his teeth.

Lizzie wanted to stop it, make excuses for him, but she knew it would be to no avail, it might only bring trouble on herself as well. Tears welled up in her eyes as the cane swished down, six times in all. Then the boy forced himself to rise and stand, though he almost buckled down, stumbling back to his seat. Pain was etched in his red face, his jaws set in agony. He ached to rub his bottom, but that would look like weakness, nor could he sit down, so he stood silently as best as he was able, wincing.



Then the unlikely happened.

As the teacher focused on him again, without words, expecting him to sit down, he uttered: "Please, sir, I would like to stand."

"Do that, if you must, but learn to keep your tongue and practise your manners." And with that Master Lazarus calmly began the lesson of the day.

Once home, Lizzie heard the real story from her father. The casks had been secured to stakes. They might have floated out to sea at high tide had they not been tied down. Therefore, the Customs collector had ruled, they were smugglers' goods and had not been accidentally lost or shipwrecked, so could not be claimed by the Squire.

The revenue men had seen a boat in the distance and the occupants were watching them as they picked up the caskets hidden by the smugglers. "I couldn't be sure at that distance," Lizzie's father recalled, "but I do believe your soot-faced and black-hearted villains were among them."

It was then that Lizzie remembered the boat and two sets of oars she had seen at the edge of the marsh just before she returned home the day the two villains had been chased from their house. Lizzie shivered with fear. *Would they be back?*



# The Silent Boy

Lizzie was on an errand for Aunt Hilda. The rough, unmade road led along a tidal river in a wild landscape, where the sea had hollowed out the edge of the land. Many old and ancient trees were leaning over towards the water, with their contorted roots reaching deep into the banks and anchoring them to hold fast and flourish. Here and there a tree had collapsed and its trunk and roots collected flotsam and allowed lichen and mosses to invade.

Beyond the edge, among the sea lavender and sea asters, the mudflats glistened blue and green like a million green islands that would be swallowed by the sea and drain out again with the tides. It was the domain of sea birds. Grey geese, sandpipers and seagulls flew by as curlews ran up and down the mud, calling and searching for tit-bits. Lizzie was deep in thought when she saw something move on the edge of the salt marsh.

She reined in Stubborn and looked again. There was nothing. Yet she was sure she had seen something move between the branches of the trees. Intrigued, and against her better judgement, she left the donkey to graze along the wayside while she very carefully slid down the embankment for a better view.

Her eyes squinted and scanned the horizon, but she must have been mistaken. Why did she act so impulsively? She scolded herself. Where she stood under the overhanging trees, amidst the tangled roots, sand had been washed up against the bank and it was quite safe to walk.

That's when Lizzie got her surprise. She had not even noticed the figure leaning against the branches of a fallen tree that reached like a skeletal hand out to the wide river.

"Oh, hello," was all she could think of saying. But no reply came. Slowly, the figure made several attempts at lighting a clay pipe, without seeming to have noticed her. As she moved slowly backwards, hoping not





to make a noise, his face turned towards her.

*It's a boy, only a boy!* Though he seemed to be trying to look older than he was. His piercing blue eyes were defiant. Lizzie could just see them under the shock of wild brown hair. He looked poorly dressed and Lizzie noticed his jerkin was almost worn away at the shoulder. A wild thrush flew between them and settled on his shoulder, as if it were the most natural thing to do.

"I didn't mean to intrude," Lizzie finally managed to say. "I thought I'd seen a... I don't know what I thought I'd seen."

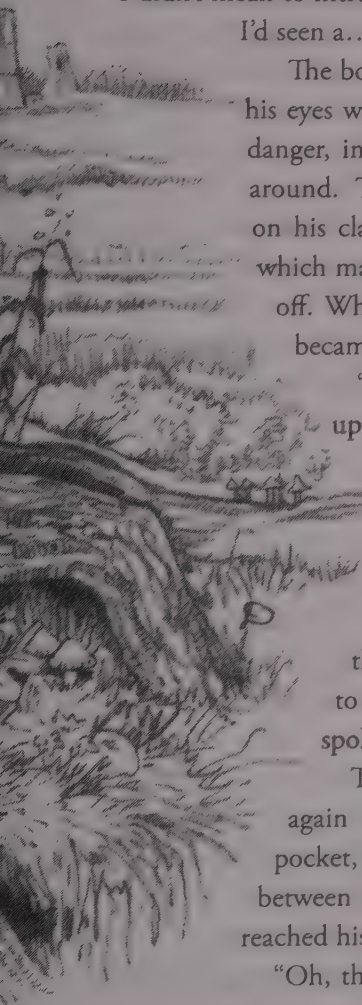
The boy just looked at her uneasily, but she thought his eyes were smiling now. She did not feel in the least danger, indeed, it seemed to her rather the other way around. The boy stood still and took another puff on his clay pipe. Moments later he started coughing, which made Lizzie laugh. She thought he was showing off. When he stopped coughing, he smiled too, and became more relaxed. But he didn't utter a word.

"It's all right," said Lizzie, "I am not checking up on you. I... I'll go back now."

She turned to try and climb back up the embankment, when the boy rushed forward to help her. He was ahead of her and reached out his hand just as she slithered back down and with a slight tug, they were both up on dry land. She wanted to thank him and wondered why he hadn't spoken.

The bird had flown up and returned to rest again on his shoulder. The boy dug deep into a pocket, brought out a grain of barley and placed it between his lips. Stretching its little neck, the thrush reached his lips with its beak and took the grain.

"Oh, that's nice," said Lizzie, impressed by the boy's





friendship with a wild bird. "How did you manage to get it that tame?"

The boy smiled again and pushed his hair out of his face, glancing at the deer, which kept its distance, but did not hide, as if it felt no particular threat. Lizzie understood that he must have brought up the thrush as she had the young deer. Then the boy pointed to his mouth and made a gargling sound, looking sad and shaking his head.

"Oh," said Lizzie, "you can't speak?" Instantly she bit her lip for being so insensitive. The boy smiled again, then looked at the grazing donkey and the deer, shaded his eyes and looked back the way she had come. "Oh, you saw me coming?" laughed Lizzie, realising he was trying to communicate. "What were you doing out there on the marshes?"

The boy shook his head, quite serious again, as if he had something to hide.

"It's all right," Lizzie tried to reassure him. "I won't tell on you. It's none of my business. Do you want a ride? I've got to hurry. I've got an errand to run."

The boy looked undecided. "Honestly, I won't tell. It's all right, come on."

He glanced at her, then at the deer, smiled and jumped back down to the edge of the marsh.

"Oh, I didn't mean to scare you, honestly. Don't be afraid." Lizzie was trying her best to assure him that she meant him no harm. Moments later, the boy scrambled back up to the roadway, clutching a small rough bag that bulged in his hand and which he tried as best he could to hide.

Lizzie laughed. "Don't worry," she said, "I won't tell you were looking for mussels out there. The Squire need never know." The boy smiled gratefully. He seemed to trust her. Then he climbed beside her on the bench of the cart.

Lizzie took the reins and with some difficulty managed to get Stubborn to forsake the tasty clover by the edge of the field and start trotting off again. She did not have to call the deer, but she did anyway. "Come on, Spotty, don't get left behind."

When they came to a T-junction in the road, Lizzie could see the Gypsy encampment in the distance, where smoke trails curled to heaven





from caravans and camp fires. The boy jumped off, still holding on to the bag that held his morning's work. He bowed a smart bow as a knight might to a great lady in her coach.

"I hope we'll meet again," laughed Lizzie. Then, as Stubborn trotted off again, she quietly sang to herself: "I've met a real Gypsy, a real Gypsy boy."

"Ah, the Gypsies are back again," said Uncle Jonah, while carving more animals and wooden dolls later that evening. "The Gypsies, they first came from Egypt, many many many years ago and many many miles away. The Israelites, they settled down, but the Gypsies, they kept on going. There is no Gypsy-land, but wherever there is a feast, the Gypsies are there to make the music. They would have been there after the Flood, when the Ark stopped and Noah released all the animals and they were there at the end of the great plague, to help the people celebrate. They'll be here next Sunday when the Toy Fair comes to the village green. You can bet they'll have lots of animals with them. Some people say they can speak with animals, they're that close."

Lizzie was tempted to tell about her meeting with the Gypsy boy who couldn't speak and the pet thrush that sat on his shoulder, but at the last moment she bit her lip in case she said too much. Instead she blurted out: "I thought they came from the East." She was proud of her new-found school learning.

"Precisely!" exclaimed Uncle Jonah. "Egypt's in the East, where the sun rises. But they're not to be trusted. They tell fortunes. Well, how do they know unless the devil tells them? I bet those two fellows in your house were Gypsies. Up to no good I shouldn't wonder. So don't you go anywhere near them Gypsies, trying to find out what they keep under them covered wagons. They can disappear as sudden as they arrive – and you with 'em, given half a chance. And where they go, only the devil knows. They seem to disappear from the face of the earth, so maybe that's where they are, not on the earth. Maybe they came here across the sea and maybe that's where they go back to all the time."

Lizzie was going to say that her father had never mentioned such an



encounter, but she thought better of it and stayed silent.

Uncle Jonah had noticed, though, and he quickly added: "Ah, you think that may not be possible? But it is. Maybe that's why that great sea serpent is out there, waiting for them Gypsies to come back and feed it." He looked at Lizzie very seriously, before he added: "maybe that's how they came here, in the first place I mean, wagons and all, in the belly of the sea monster. And maybe that's where they are when they're not here. So don't you go anywhere near them."

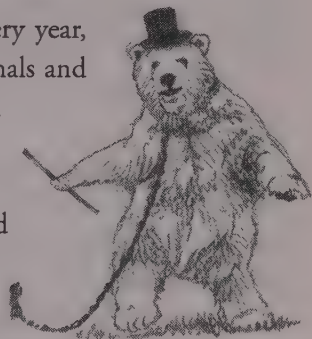


# Toy Fair on the Green

The Toy Fair on the village green in front of the Squire's Hall was a tradition that went back to a time before anyone could remember. And because it was such a tradition, the children had a day off school. People would come from all around the parish and further to sell or buy, or simply to enjoy themselves.

Uncle Jonah set up his stall as he did every year, selling his carved wooden toys and dolls, animals and jack-in-the-boxes. The children loved his stall and his stories.

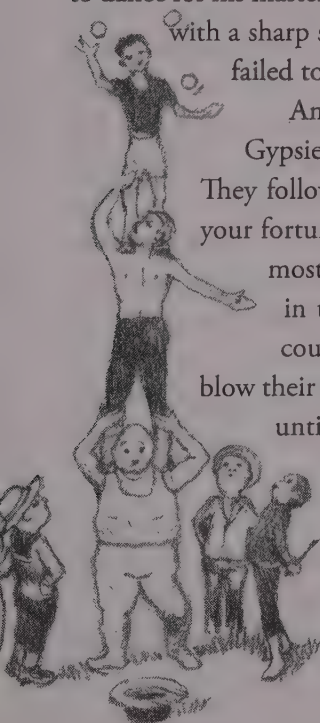
There were jugglers and tumblers and a man with a performing bear. The poor bear had to dance for his master, who would prod him with a sharp stick if he stopped and failed to amuse the onlookers.



And there were many

Gypsies, selling clothes pegs and offering to read palms. They followed people about, calling out: "Want me tell you your fortune, dear? Looks like you are going to be rich." But most of all, the Gypsies came to entertain the crowds in the hope of collecting some coins. They could be counted on to make music, stroke their fiddles and blow their primitive bagpipes - doodlebags - under their arms until feet tapped and even the most staid of matrons risked a few steps and were swung about in a stately dance or a rousing jig.

Lizzie got quite a surprise when she walked around the fair with Aunt Hilda. Among the musicians under the large elm tree was the one



she had named 'the silent boy'. He was so deeply absorbed in his fiddle, at first he did not notice her among the crowd, but when he did he smiled and Lizzie blushed and turned away, so as not to draw attention to him, especially from Aunt Hilda. It would have been difficult to admit how and where she got to know him without explaining what he had been doing there.

But she found excuses to stay around the musicians for as long as she could. When the jig came to a halt, the boy stood up and played a traditional Gypsy tune with such lilting softness and feeling, he made his fiddle sing with joy and sadness. Lizzie was certain he was playing for her, perhaps as thank-you for not telling on him.

"It's beautiful," she said to Aunt Hilda, "I wish I could play like that."

Although she did not comment, Lizzie's interest had not escaped Aunt Hilda. "Perhaps we ought to have a word with your uncle," she said, taking the girl's hand. "I'm sure he could make you a flute or something."

There was a sudden scuffle in the crowd and a voice cried out: "That's him. There he is. I saw him up on One-Tree-Hill with a knife. He had a familiar with him. It sat on his shoulder and whispered in his ear and then he did it." Sam Smagge shook indignantly as he called out, pointing a thin, knobbly finger at the Gypsy boy.

The music stopped. The musicians looked scared, but they crowded around the boy, who just stood there, open-mouthed and bewildered.

"You see, he can't deny it. He won't deny it. Speak up boy, tell the truth, if a Gypsy ever knew the truth."

A crowd quickly gathered. Sam Smagge was backed up by the village Constable. "Go on, take him," he told the Constable, "it's him, I tell you."

The Constable stepped forward, but the other Gypsies barred his way. "Come now, boy, don't make it worse for yourself."

"What is he supposed to have done?" one of the musicians asked.

"Murder!" said the Constable with a grim tone. "We haven't found





the body yet, but we will."

The fair crowd gasped. "Murder!" The word came from many mouths and then all was quiet. Lizzie couldn't believe what was happening. She wanted to step forward but she did not know what she could do.

"Murder?" repeated the elder of the Gypsies. "Who? Where? When?"

"That's for the judge to decide," stated the Constable with as much authority as he could muster.

"You believe the word of a smuggler without proof?" asked the elder Gypsy. "Who is Stefan supposed to have murdered?"

The crowd took a step backwards, then surged again, leaning forward, so as not to miss anything.

*Stefan, so that's his name,* thought Lizzie.

"Well," said the Constable, standing up to his full height, "Sam Smagge here says he saw the boy near a place where we think a murder took place. He tried to hold up a carriage, up near One-Tree-Hill the day afore yesterday. So come with me, boy, and don't make a fuss!"

The Gypsies did not move.

"Why doesn't he speak up? Save himself. You see, he doesn't deny it," weaselled Sam.

"That's because the boy cannot speak. Never could. And he was nowhere near that hill, whatever you said."

Lizzie knew he couldn't have been. The 'day afore yesterday' was the day she had met him near the marshes. But who would believe her?

Voices came from the crowd, some of whom had spent the morning in the ale houses: "Murder? Hang the Gypsy."

"Who's been murdered?"

"Burn him, with his familiar. We don't want no Gypsy witches here."

People who had only moments earlier listened to the Gypsies' music, now became disagreeable and aggressive. They were quick to condemn the boy because of his wild pet. 'Familiars' were thought to do the work of witches, although they might only be pet cats or dogs or frogs, or a



thrush, as in the boy's case.

It looked like a fight was going to break out and Lizzie's young heart feared for the boy. This whole story was so silly. She turned to her aunt: "I'll go and call the Squire. He'll know what to do."

"No, no," said Aunt Hilda, "it's none of our business."

"But it is," challenged Lizzie, "believe me, please. The Gypsy boy is innocent."

"How would you know that?" Aunt Hilda started to ask, but she stopped when she noticed the seriousness on Lizzie's face.

"The Squire'll be at the Blue Anchor now, doing business. He won't thank you for interrupting," she warned instead.

"I'll find him," cried Lizzie and with that she ran off towards the Blue Anchor pub, on the other side of the church.

The Squire and his party were dining on bacon and beans. The fair was always a time to do business. Rents would be collected and bargains would be struck. Deals would include cattle and pigs, fowl and fish of the marshes, cheese from the marsh sheep, and many a smuggled barrel of gin or brandy changed hands.

Lizzie's audacity at entering such an important company and directly addressing the Squire surprised and silenced everybody. She did not think twice: "Please, sir, there is going to be an injustice. And maybe a fight. You must come and stop it, sir, please?" She was out of breath and had to stop.

Someone tried to push her aside: "Come now, my girl, this is no place for children."

Lizzie stood her ground. She was almost in tears. "Please, sir, there's going to be an injustice!"

The Squire was in a merry mood. He cleared his throat and said with a grand gesture: "I'm not a judge, my girl, nor am I a constable."

"Ah, sir, but you are the Squire," said Lizzie.

The rotund man looked amused. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, "I better look into this matter. I am, as you heard, the Squire. This young lady does not easily cry wolf."



If he was honest, it tickled him to show off in front of the meeting, that this girl should think he could solve all possible problems. *You don't need something this small in your kitchen*, he chuckled to himself, remembering what she'd said the last time they had met.

The rest of the company looked at each other as if the Squire had lost his wits. But he was unperturbed. "Come on, gentlemen, this might be good sport. Join me, come on, humour me."

Everyone around the table got to their feet to follow the Squire and the child that had summoned him, some shaking their heads, most, with their periwigs comically askew, took their mugs of ale with them. Wigs were the latest fashion for men of substance and importance.

The village green was indeed in turmoil. The Constable had got hold of the boy and the other Gypsies were hanging on to him as in a tug-of-war. The crowd were shouting and gesticulating, but they calmed and divided to allow a path for the important party. Some were open-mouthed with astonishment at being joined by the gentlemen in wigs.

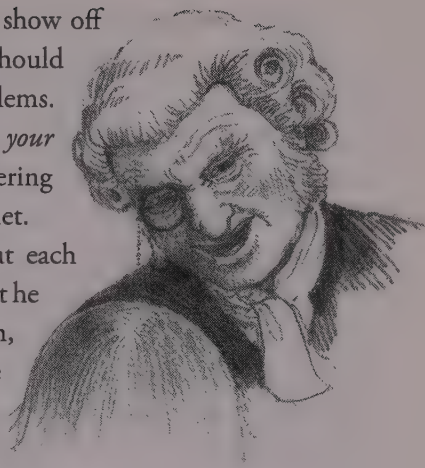
"Now then," said the Squire, rising slightly in stature. He had to repeat himself in a louder voice before he could be heard. "Now then! What seems to be the trouble?"

"The Gypsy boy is accused of murder and I aim to take him in for investigation," said the Constable, somewhat grandly.

"Well," said the Squire, "who accuses him and whom has he murdered?"

"Sam Smagge here accuses him and we do not know who is dead yet," said the Constable.

"Oh," said the Squire sternly, "I feel like Solomon the Wise in the Bible. If no one has been murdered, it may or may not be true. Or maybe your Sam Smagge did it?"



The crowd gasped. Sam Smagge tried to hide behind the Constable. Suddenly he was not so brave, nor did he like the way things were turning out.

"But if there has been a crime and we cannot be sure of either accused or accuser, perhaps you ought to put both into the lock-up until the accusation has been cleared up."

"Oh no, sire, surely that won't be necess...?" The Constable changed his mind when he saw the look on the Squire's face. "Yes, sire, perhaps that is a good idea. We shall search the woods tomorrow."

Sam Smagge struggled and protested at the injustice, but the Constable had no option but to arrest both him and the boy. Reluctantly the other Gypsies let go and the two prisoners were taken off to the lock-up for the night.

The Squire turned to Lizzie and with an exaggerated gesture, asked: "Well, Milady, does my solution agree with you?"

"Well," said Lizzie quietly, "it's not solved yet. At least they'll both be safe. Thank you, sir, thank you."

The Squire turned away and said: "Hmmm," in a self-satisfied way, sticking out his chin and clasping his hands behind his back, while his companions praised his wisdom all the way back to the Blue Anchor.





# The Monster from the Sky

When Lizzie's father returned that evening, Lizzie told him the story, including her earlier meeting with Stefan. Her father was sympathetic, but there was nothing he or anybody could do until the matter of the murder was sorted out. He did know of Sam Smagge – he'd always suspected Sam to be a smuggler, but he had never been able to catch him out or prove anything.

Early next morning, Lizzie tied some bread and cheese into a red 'kerchief for Stefan's breakfast, and visited the lock-up, only to find that Stefan was quite well looked after and that some of his family had camped there all night to be near him.

During the school break, the boys teased Lizzie about her attempt at helping a Gypsy boy, though of course they did not know her reasons why. Lizzie just smiled at them, even when they accused the Gypsy boy of being a witch. The Smagge boys were especially vocal. It was their uncle who had accused the Gypsy boy of murder.

"Didn't Lizzie herself always have some 'familiar' about her in the shape of a deer and an owl?" they asked, with malice in mind.

Their teasing only stopped when one village lad, Gregory, eager to outdo their tales of Gypsies and witches, told them what he had seen the day before.

"There was a great beast with a huge fire-breathing belly that came from the sky and landed on One-Tree-Hill. It had been horrible and huge, a terrible monster. I wouldn't be surprised if it had set fire to One-Tree-Hill," said Gregory.

The others would not admit that they were scared and so they laughed at Gregory and his story.



But Gregory insisted: "My pa heard it from a traveller, who had been so frightened, he had hidden in a barn and had refused to come out for a long time afterwards. And then he had still been shaking. He even mentioned a 'devil's coach' he had seen with his own eyes and it had hurried away from the spot, said my pa'. He'd got away with his life, the stranger said, but he was a-feared the fiery demon might come back for him. That's what my pa' said."

Lizzie had an idea. A silly idea, perhaps, but an idea that grew in her mind. She had stood up to gargoyles, so after school she tried to get Gregory to tell her exactly when the fiery beast had landed. The boy was too upset and did not want to speak about it any more. So later Lizzie told her father about it and eventually her father agreed he would look up the boy Gregory's father and find out more about the fiery visitation.

Her father did not come home that evening. When he did return, he had been to London by barge and back and in his company was a handsome stranger.

He introduced Mr Blanchard, 'a well-dressed, and educated young man who was a scientist, engaged in producing maps of the land. Mr Blanchard explained he was experimenting with balloons filled with hot air, as a recent scientific discovery showed, they could carry people aloft. For Lizzie it was an exciting story and very daring.

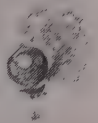
"Gregory saw your balloon and described it as a great beast with a huge fire-breathing belly!" she told him.

Mr Blanchard raised an eyebrow high up onto his brow: "You know, Lizzie, I haven't given it much thought, but you are right. People often hide when they see me in the sky. And when I land, they are surprised that I am human like them. The few that have been brave enough to come close have said they thought my hot air balloon was some devilish dragon beast that breathed fire. People can be quite amazed.

Her father quizzed Mr Blanchard about the trouble he had with his hot air balloon. He had been forced to land on a hillside that was 'crowned', as he put it, by one very large tree. It was the very day Sam Smagge had said the Gypsy boy had been on One-Tree-Hill,



"Well, as I looked through my spyglass, I saw two horses tied up at the edge of the woods near that large tree and a man quickly hiding beneath it when he looked up and saw my balloon in the sky. He must have thought me a strange apparition. But I thought it just as odd to find one man with two horses," the young man said, in a cultured voice. "I'm afraid I didn't see much more, as I was concerned with landing safely and when my colleagues caught up with me in our carriage, we packed up the balloon and hastened back to London before nightfall."



Lizzie hung on his every word. "Ah," she said, "that would account for the story of the 'devil's coach' racing away."

"Would you recognise the man again?" her father asked the scientist.

"My spyglass is quite powerful," Mr Blanchard said confidently.

"And would you recognise the spot where the two horses had been tied up?" Lizzie's father wondered.

The visitor frowned: "I think I could, in relation to that dominant tree, though it was in such a quiet area."

"Oh, to be able to see the world like a bird, to fly like a bird, with the birds. It must be marvellous," Lizzie enthused.

"The world looks quite different from up there, like a patchwork quilt with hedges and rivers and castles and towns. But it is not like being a bird," Mr Blanchard chuckled at Lizzie's enthusiasm, "I can only



fly where the wind takes me, so I have to choose my flying days very carefully."

Then, in response to Lizzie's eagerness, he added: "Well, young lady, you're no great weight, perhaps someday, when all this is over, you will come and join me on one of my flights?"

Lizzie's hazel eyes lit up: "Oh, do you mean it, Mr Blanchard? Could I? Could I really?" She jumped up and threw her arms about the young man, but part of her guessed he would probably forget all about his promise to give a small girl a lift in his aerial balloon.

So it was, the scientist, Mr Blanchard, and Lizzie's father, the Inspector, worked together to solve the crime. Mr Blanchard recognised Sam Smagge as the man he had seen hiding on the hill, though the smuggler denied everything.

The following day the two men, together with the Constable, the Squire and some more revenue men rode on horseback to One-Tree-Hill. Only the Squire travelled in comfort in his coach and four horses with a coachman.

Mr Blanchard was able to point out the spot where he had seen the horses tied up, while the revenue riders found chests and small barrels and bundles of smuggled goods hidden in undergrowth nearby for future collection.

The Squire's coach came in use as a means to deliver the contraband goods to the Revenue Office. The Squire's dogs, Arch and Deacon, meanwhile, had been running deeper in the woods, when suddenly they stopped and howled and drew attention to one particular spot. Everybody followed and the Inspector's men dug and soon made another, much more sinister and grisly discovery. In a shallow grave they found a man whom the Inspector recognised as someone under suspicion of smuggling and other nastier crimes.

One of his men also recognised the dead man: "He was a friend of Sam Smagge. I've seen them together."

Yet the body had not been stabbed, as Sam Smagge had said, he had been struck on the back of the head with a blunt instrument.



There was one more thing to do. The Inspector's men searched Sam Smagge's farm on Candy Island and there, hidden out of sight, was a horse that did not belong to him. Sam Smagge had just been too greedy.

When he was taken before the judge later, he owned up to almost everything in order to win mercy. The quarrel with his friend – he said the dead man had forced him to be a smuggler. The way he had defended himself with a shovel as they were digging to hide their stash. He claimed he had panicked when he knew he had been seen by the 'fiery monster from hell' that was coming for him as in final judgement. He had only accused the Gypsy boy to draw attention away from himself, and not because the boy could not speak in his own defence.

He also said he had kept his former friend's horse to return it to his family. Sam even thanked everybody for locking him up, so that the fiery monster could not get to him.

The judge did not believe much of what he said: "Sam Smagge, you are to be deported to Devil's Island on the other side of the world for the rest of your no-good life."

As Stefan was set free, he looked bewildered, Lizzie was told, and she danced with joy when she heard of his release. As for the Squire, he told everybody that he'd been the first to suspect the truth, which was why he had the Constable lock up Sam Smagge as well. Lizzie's father knew it had really been his daughter who had connected the story of the aerial balloon and of the crime accusation. In his heart, the Squire knew it too. But it made him look wise and he appreciated that.

Rumours soon became rife in the village. Some said Sam Smagge had fallen overboard in the Pool of London before his ship sailed. He had drowned with his iron shackles on. Some even said he had picked a fight and been killed by another prisoner. Others heard he had feigned death and been buried at sea. But there were some who thought him much too slippery a fellow to die that easily.



# The Keeper of Owls

Uncle Jonah was sitting in his favourite chair by the fire. "What is it going to be?" Lizzie asked, looking bemused at his latest creation.

"You mind your own, young Lizzie," Uncle Jonah mumbled without looking up, "it's not for nosy noses to know." Then he added, as if regretting his curt answer: "It's a secret." With that he tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger and Lizzie asked no more questions. She could now see he was carving elm wood owls.

He was glad the young owl was with her: "Watching your owlet helps me to carve my owls more realistically," he said. But his owls were large and hollow and they had large hollow eyes.

Sooty's broken wing was healing and the owlet had taken to sitting on Lizzie's shoulder or even on her head. Lizzie sometimes wondered what the Gypsy boy would think of her now, but the Gypsies had vanished the day Stefan had been released from the lock-up.

"You know," said Uncle Jonah, "they're part of all the faces of the forest, all the eyes of the night. Owls are living spirits, just like elves and sprites. And just like elves and sprites we don't often see them. That's because they don't want us to see them, but you are much more likely to. Children have the imagination. Usually they stay away from people – elves I mean. People mean trouble. Take me for instance," he grinned.

"And when an elf gets into mischief or misbehaves, he or she is banished into a tree, only to be released when the tree dies. The worst thing is, that they don't always look like elves any more. If they've harmed a hare, they might look like a hare and if they've been unkind to a worm or a human, they may look like a worm or a human, just so they know what it's like to be a hare or a worm." He pulled a face to look more

wrinkled: "Or a wrinkly old man."

Uncle Jonah had to stop for breath, he had been talking so fast and serious, but Lizzie looked doubtful at this story. So he explained: "I found a tree the other day that held several such elves, though of course I did not know that at first. It was a warm day and I was looking for carving wood and I was dozing in the shade of this large old tree. Funny that, it's almost always old trees that hold the elves – we call them tree spirits sometimes. Maybe that's because an old tree can release its spirits sooner than a young one? Hmm, yes, funny that."

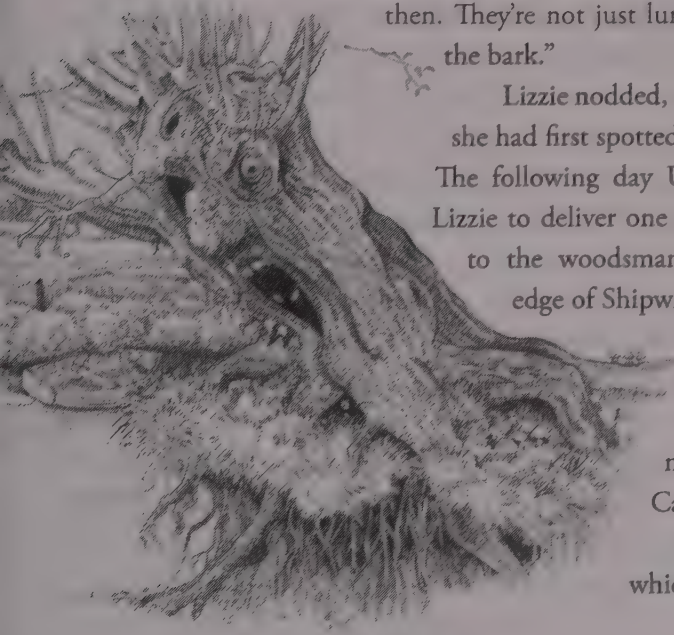
Deep in his own thoughts he stopped to re-light his clay pipe and puffed at it a few times before he continued: "Well, as I was sayin', they must have thought I'd fallen asleep, so they ignored me."

He looked earnestly into Lizzie's eyes, then he almost whispered the words as if he were worried someone else might hear: "I'm sure I heard them talk. Maybe it was only the rustling in the leaves and a creakin' in the wood, but I'm sure I heard them talk. You just look at some of the old trees along the river, you might believe me, then. They're not just lumps and bumps in the bark."

Lizzie nodded, thinking of the tree she had first spotted Stefan behind.

The following day Uncle Jonah asked Lizzie to deliver one of his hollow owls to the woodsman's cottage on the edge of Shipwrights Wood up on the high land, and the other to the mill on the marsh called the Castle Mill.

He instructed her which pathway she



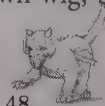
was to follow: "Don't you go anywhere near the old castle ruins. They are haunted by demons and dragons," he said, sternly. "Nobody goes near them. None that lived to tell the tale that is. Not the Squire, nor the Constable. They say it's a view up there over all the low lands and the river and as far as the sea, but them that seen it could never talk about it. So don't you be tempted, my girl, you follow the road around and down to the mill and you'll be safe and then back home afore it's too late. Promise me you will."

Lizzie packed the carved owls securely on her trap and Stubborn trotted off reluctantly. Her own living owl sat beside her on the board. First, she turned out of the village as if she was making for home and sure enough, Spotty joined her as if from nowhere. She stroked the deer for a moment and said 'hello' before setting out around the village, up through a narrow cutting that had deep tracks and ruts made by many carts up and down over many years. As long as anybody could remember it was the main way up to the high land.

But going to high ground was new for the animals, and Lizzie had to lead the donkey up the hill as it refused to move otherwise. The deer made its own way up through the trees and joined them again at the top, where the land was covered by heather and woods. Lizzie had been up there once before with her mother and father, but she could barely remember that. Her father had carried her high on his shoulder and they had been able to see the ships in the distance. The wind now tore at her hair and blew a tear from her cheek.

As if they realised Lizzie needed cheering up, Spotty jumped and frolicked beside her and Sooty stood on one leg and flapped its good wing. There were still London bound ships sailing on the river, but none as big as her father's ship had been. At least her father was not going to sea any more, well, not for long periods at a time.

At Shipwrights Wood, she found the woodsman's house easily enough, and the woodsman. His curly woolly beard and side-whiskers covered most of his face like an upside-down wig, but his eyes twinkled and he



gestured to Lizzie to hand her parcel to his wife. Lizzie walked carefully on the soft ground between great mounts of tree trunks that were piled up, ready for transporting down to the village and the waiting ships and barges. Great big sledges were being loaded with the trunks and strong horses, their harnesses still loosened, were standing by to pull them.

Spotty stayed well back and out of sight as Lizzie handed Uncle Jonah's carved owl over to the woodsman's wife. She had a shrill voice and barely said 'thank you'. Lizzie stuttered that she was supposed to bring back two shillings to Uncle Jonah.

The woman shrieked: "Oh, you'll have to see old Woollychops about that. It's his business. Too fond is he of his tippie and his bacci. I have no money. He never gives me any." And with that, she slammed the door shut behind her.

Lizzie stood her ground, but now she could not see the woodsman either. Just then a large pile of logs that had not been fastened securely began to move, splintering the uprights that were supposed to hold them and sending them crashing down noisily. As the trunks tumbled and rolled towards the heavy horses, they rose on their hind legs whinnying and neighing, frightened by the noise, and their chains clanked as their front legs boxed the air in panic.

The logs stopped rolling just short of the tethered horses and the handler ran to calm them down. Lizzie also had to calm her frightened donkey that had jumped and upset the cart and dragged it along for a short way twisted in its harness.

"Oh, dear," said the woodsman as he helped Lizzie to right the cart and checked that all was well. Uncle Jonah's second carved owl had been thrown clear, but was undamaged on the soft woodland floor. Stubborn still shivered, but otherwise all was fine.

"I'll see your uncle about payment," said the woodsman "Don't you worry."

It was only then that Lizzie noticed Sooty was missing: "Oh dear, my owl! It has a broken wing, and maybe it's not healed yet."



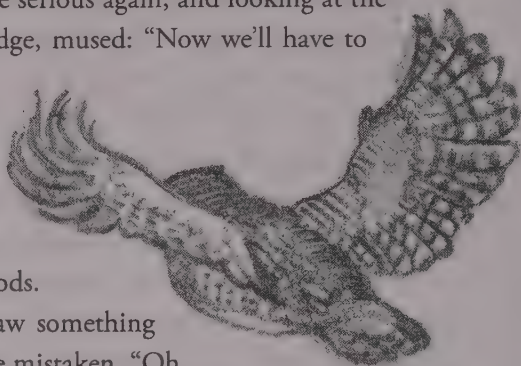
"Is that what it was? Something flew over my head. I say flew, but it looked more like tumbling. An owl, was it?" the woodsman laughed. "Well, I never." Then he became serious again, and looking at the logs that had rolled off the sledge, mused: "Now we'll have to start all over... ah, well."

Lizzie ran off in the direction the woodsman had indicated, calling out: "Sooty, Sooty," while running deeper and deeper into the woods.

Sometimes, she thought she saw something fluttering but knew she must be mistaken. "Oh, Sooty, come back, it's all right. Don't break your wing again. Sooty, where are you?"

Quite suddenly, she came to a clearing in the forest ahead of her and before she could stop herself, Lizzie ran straight into the arms of a thin, tall man in baggy trousers and a loose-fitting shirt, who smelled strongly of tobacco.

"Now then, what have we here?" he whispered in her ear. "Strange things are running wild in this forest today."





## “Beware the Ropes! But don’t be afraid.”

Lizzie struggled free from the stranger and almost screamed in fear, but then remembered what she had been looking for.

“My owl. Sooty is my owl. It got frightened and flew off, but it’s got a broken wing. Have you seen it?”

“An owl with a broken wing, flying free in the woods and a young lady with a broken heart out looking for it?”

Lizzie looked around her, frantically now, in these strange surroundings and saw lots of other people. What had she stumbled into? And where was Sooty?

The man turned to an older woman who was sitting on the tailboard of a brightly coloured covered wagon, smoking a pipe, surrounded by children of all ages and some dogs and pigeons.

Lizzie thought the man was making fun of her, so she turned to the Gypsy woman: “My young owl, it’s got a broken wing. Has anyone seen it?”

“Shame on you, Mihai,” said the old woman before turning to Lizzie: “You must have a good heart to worry so about a poor creature. Especially one that’s of no use to you.”

“It got frightened,” cried Lizzie, now much calmer, “and I can’t find it in this large forest. And I think I’m lost, too. I’ve lost my donkey and trap as well.” She was close to tears.

The old woman bade her come closer, so that she could stroke Lizzie’s auburn hair. Lizzie trusted her, though she didn’t know why.

“You’re a good girl, but you have had much pain in your life. A bereavement perhaps? Yes, that’s it. Someone very close to you has died, but there has been some joy, too. Someone has returned to you from far,



far away. Someone you love very much and who will be worried about you. Oh, my..." The old woman pulled her hand back and put it over her own mouth as if to stop herself speaking.

"What do you see?" Lizzie asked with alarm. The old woman hesitated and looked away into the distance. "Tell me, please, please, you've been right in all you said, tell me please, what do you see? Is it my mother?"

A bony arthritic hand touched Lizzie's hair again as if the contact channelled knowledge or wisdom. Finally the thin wrinkled lips spoke again, but much softer: "Your mother loves you very much and is proud of you. No, it's fine. You will be very happy."

"But why can't you tell me? Why? Please, what did you see?"

The old Gypsy woman tried to calm Lizzie, but Lizzie was worried now. After some moments of silence the woman spoke seriously and slowly, as if considering every word: "You are in a place of wood and water. Beware the ropes. But don't be afraid."

*What a strange thing to say,* thought Lizzie, but try as she might, the old woman would go no further with her explanation. The children about her were cutting clothes pegs from pieces of wood and the smallest cuddled a puppy in her arms as if it were a baby.

Suddenly the old woman smiled: "But there is something I see, that will make you very happy much sooner, if I'm not mistaken." She took her pipe and pointed in the direction from which Lizzie had arrived. Lizzie turned and ran laughing and skipping towards the silent boy who led her donkey and trap into the clearing: "Oh, Stefan, you've found them. Thank you. Is Sooty all right?"

The boy smiled triumphantly and made some signs Lizzie did not understand. A thrush flew up from his shoulder and settled again moments later, next to the brightly coloured neck scarf he wore. Lizzie patted Stubborn's head and then began to laugh, because on the driver's bench, where Lizzie usually sat, stood the young owl as if it were in charge, its bandaged wing in place as usual.

Lizzie turned to Stefan and then to the old woman: "How did he find them? And Sooty? Oh thank you, Stefan." She wanted to hug him, but





shook his hand instead. And the thrush stayed on his shoulder.

The old woman smiled. "Stefan can see much that other people can't. He says he found the donkey wandering in this direction and the owl was already there on the trap. It must have come back on its own. It must like you, young lady." She turned to the thin man: "Mihai, you should be making coffee by now. Where are your manners? It was thanks to this young lady our Stefan was released from the lock-up on fair-day. We ought to honour her and her courage."

Lizzie was most surprised, but before she could say anything, the old woman continued: "But first we ought to look at your owl's broken wing." She knocked out her pipe and smiled. "Can you bring it to me?"

Lizzie was so confused by all that was happening, she simply picked up the owlet and handed it to the old woman, who took the bird with both hands and slowly removed the stiff bandage and began closely inspecting the broken wing. Maybe it was the way she held the bird or maybe the bird sensed it was in good hands, but it hardly struggled. Lizzie watched carefully, just as she had watched Aunt Hilda.

At last the old woman spoke again: "Whoever put on the splint did a wonderful job. It's almost healed. Young creatures and young people heal so much quicker." With that she sighed, replaced the bandage and handed the owlet back to Lizzie, who placed it on the cart.

It had been quiet in the camp while the old woman examined the owl, now dogs barked again and Mihai brought a steaming kettle and some mugs and they all gathered around the fire, where a thick vegetable stew cooked in a large pot, attended by young women.

Colourful wooden caravan wagons with high arching roofs were arranged in a wide circle around them to protect the group. Chickens pecked the ground about their cages and goats and an ox were tethered nearby. A number of horses grazed at the far side of the circle. Butterflies danced in sunbeams on the edge of the clearing, spiralling higher and higher.

Fruit and berries were handed about on platters. Lizzie tried the stew, though the taste of garlic was new to her. Several adults joined them





and Lizzie had to tell all she knew of the fiery balloon that had landed and helped to free Stefan from the Constable and what happened to the murderer Sam Smagge.

“A balloon that flies by fire and doesn’t burn,” repeated Mihai, “how very strange.”

When Lizzie spoke of her surprise at seeing Stefan at the fair and admiring his skill with his violin, everyone urged him to entertain them with some real traditional Gypsy music. Some of the other musicians from the village fair joined in with cymbals and drums.

“Come on, Stefan, let’s all celebrate your good fortune. You can serenade the young lady right here.”

Young women danced gracefully and children joined them with hand cymbals on their fingers and their pigtails whirled as they turned. Mihai excelled on the panpipes. Stefan played with such virtuosity and feeling, that Lizzie clapped her hands in time to the music and wished it could go on forever.

Forever? The thought struck her like a thunderbolt. Uncle Jonah’s second owl had not been delivered and it was getting late. She panicked slightly, being torn between a longing to stay and her sense of duty to her normal life.

“Do not worry, young lady,” said the old woman calmly. “Stefan will take you back as far as need be. But you better leave now.”

Lizzie had forgotten about Spotty. Would the deer be lost as well? She had not seen it since she had ran off after Sooty. As if, or maybe because she knew, the old woman added: “You have another friend you are worried about, don’t you? But don’t fret, all will be well.”

Much as Lizzie gestured for the boy to sit beside her and the owlet, Stefan insisted on holding the donkey’s reins and leading them out of the woods and on her way home until she could see her father’s cottage. Lizzie kept looking back and about her, but the deer was nowhere to be seen.

She resolved to make another trip to deliver the second carved owl the next day. Maybe the deer would find her then? And maybe she might





meet up with Stefan again? Just as he was about to turn away and return to the woodland camp, the boy stopped, gathered a bunch of wild flowers, poppies, corn flowers and feverfew, and handed them up to Lizzie on her high seat.

"Oh, thank you, Stefan, they're so nice. Tomorrow, remember tomorrow."

Aunt Hilda and Lizzie's father were waiting for her anxiously and were just about to go out looking for her when she returned. When she told her story with all the day's adventures, they agreed there had been no real danger. They had a surprise of their own. Spotty had found its own way back and was already in its sleeping place in the stable.

Later Lizzie's father agreed she could drive out again the next day after school, and he hoped the Gypsy boy would be there to protect her. Lizzie was very tired and went to sleep quickly that evening, still pondering the old Gypsy woman's strange words.



# The Mill by the Creek

For once, school could not finish early enough for Lizzie. As soon as she could, she set out again like the day before, not to the high forest that led to the castle ruins, but skirting it low along the marsh and the river's edge. So much had happened the previous day, she looked forward to meeting Stefan again. But Stefan was nowhere to be seen.

To one side, Lizzie had a view across the marshes to the wide river, where boats and barges and large ships with tall masts and many sails moved slowly and stately in both directions, laden with goods from the West Indies and the Far East. Some would also be taking prisoners back to those faraway places. That's how Sam Smagge would have left the country to serve his sentence for murder. Lizzie shuddered at the thought of someone having to leave home forever.

She looked about her. *Whatever had happened to Stefan?*

The donkey trotted on with the deer nearby and the owlet was back in its position beside Lizzie on the small driver's bench. Lizzie relaxed. She could trust her animals. They would know if anything were amiss.

As the roadway tracked along the curve of Castle Hill, it followed the mouth of a small dry stream, which would fill when the tide came in and permit boats and barges to deliver corn direct to the mill ahead. Curious ancient willows that were quite misshapen and hollow lined the stream and were leaning over the water, their exposed roots washed by the stream. Lizzie noted some were big enough for someone to hide in.

Lizzie heard the mill before she saw it. At least she heard the children. They were skipping with old ropes, playing hop-scotch and running about noisily. When they saw Lizzie and her donkey and cart, several came excitedly towards her. Spotty stayed well behind and out of reach, but Lizzie had to put her arm about the owlet to keep it from trying to fly off.



"Have you come to visit us?" the children called out. "What's the owl doing under your arm?"

Lizzie sighed. "Hello," she said without stopping. "I've come to see your father."

She waited with some trepidation, remembering the shrill woman who had answered at the woodsman's cottage, but she needn't have worried. In the doorway appeared a jolly round woman in a very large apron who smiled and invited her inside. Her arms were covered with flour, as was her hair and the rest of her.

"Come in, young lady, come in. Don't stand on ceremony. It's not often we have a visitor, least it be some farmer with his corn or the hoymen coming by the water. They're always in a hurry, trying to catch the tide and anyway they have business with my husband. And what might your business be, young lady?"

Inside there was an older girl, about Lizzie's age, also wearing a large apron and similarly covered in flour. She smiled shyly, but did not say much.

Lizzie felt quite grown-up being addressed as 'young lady', something the Squire had done as well. She tried to hand over Uncle Jonah's carved owl to the jolly woman, but she shrank back and asked Lizzie to put it on the dresser where her husband would find it. Lizzie was somewhat surprised, but thought maybe the woman did not want to touch it with her flour-covered hands.

"I'll only be a moment, just making some bread and then you must join us for a piece of cake and some milk."

The woman talked while she kneaded the dough, formed it into bread shapes with the help of the older girl and then on a large, long-handled wooden paddle, she pushed the loaves into the baker's oven at the far side of the room. "Keep an eye on it, Megan," she said to the girl. "And mind the baby."

The baby was actually a small child in another corner of the room, as round as his mother, and with a curl of blond hair. The child stood within a padded iron hoop that was secured under his arms. This in turn was



attached to a bar that joined another loop, which encircled an upright beam.

*How clever*, thought Lizzie, as she spied the child's podgy toes peeping out from the hem of an embroidered nightgown. She watched as the child propelled himself in a circle around the beam in either direction, happy and gurgling and totally captivated by a carved wooden spoon he was waving.

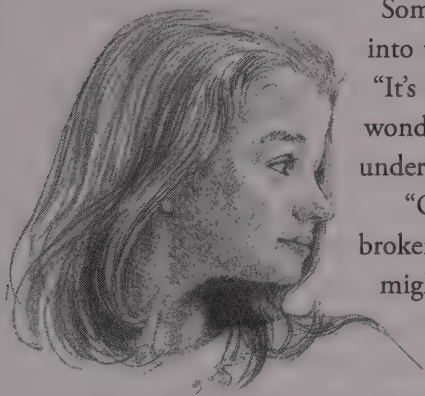
"What shall I call you?" the woman asked.

"I'm Lizzie, Lizzie Masters," said Lizzie, collecting her thoughts. "Uncle Jonah is carving many owls."

"Oh, then you must be the poor child whose mother died of the fever not long ago and your father away at sea an' all."

"That was last year. My... my mother died last year," answered Lizzie quietly, "and my father has come back from the sea."

"Nobody tells me anything," said the woman. "I did like your mother. Such a delicate creature. Of course, she wasn't from hereabouts. A lady she was, and you look so like her."



Some of the children had followed Lizzie into the house and stood about expectantly. "It's your owl," said their mother, they're wondering why you are carrying an owl under your arm."

"Oh," said Lizzie, "this is Sooty. She's broken a wing and she is very shy and she might fly off again and hurt herself. Her wing is still bandaged."

"Fancy that," said the woman and turning to her children, she added: "There, you see, all you want to do is run around and break things. Let that be a lesson to you, being nice to animals and birds."

She turned back to Lizzie again. "Do you want to put the owl on top of the oven, it's quite safe up there?"

Lizzie felt awkward standing there, holding Sooty, so she welcomed



the offer to place her out of harm's way. It was warm up there, but not hot and Sooty soon looked drowsy as her eyelids almost closed.

"And I don't want anyone rushing about while the owl is here, or else..." The miller's wife punctuated her words by waving the rolling pin she was holding, but the children just stood there, expectantly. All of them had come in now.

Lizzie suppressed a smile when she realised how similarly the rolling pin and the toddler's carved spoon were waved about.

"Better get the flan I made earlier," the woman said to the girl Megan, who opened a cupboard and retrieved an enormous flat cake with fruit on top and placed it on the dining table which dominated the room. Benches along either side of it were instantly filled with bottoms of varying sizes.

"Go give a hand," the woman ordered a lad, whom Lizzie recognised from school. Almost instantly he appeared with armfuls of mugs filled to the brim with milk, the contents of which soon disappeared into the hungry mouths. Then the woman herself stood up and with a knife divided the cake into strips and smaller pieces and a sea of little hands received their portions.

Barely had they downed the milk and the cake, several of the larger children disappeared again outside. Only the smaller ones stayed on. Lizzie couldn't decide whether it was out of curiosity or because they hoped for another helping.

The woman had noticed Lizzie's look at her son. "Of course," she smiled, "you're the girl at school with the boys. I hope they're still concentrating on learning. They need their learning later when they don't want to be cheated. But a girl? My, whatever next?"

At that moment there was a commotion and a door flew open from the direction of the mill. "How many times must I say it?" yelled the miller, as he came storming in, surrounded by a cloud of flour, but he stopped himself short when he noticed the visitor at the table. "Oh, no one told me we had company."

Instantly he calmed down. His stern look evaporated and the thick





lines on his forehead evened out. His sleeves were turned up, but with all the dust and flour on his arms, not to mention his trousers and hair, everything was the same pale grey colour as his shirt.

His wife had taken no notice at his outburst, but frowned in his direction after glancing at the baby who had dropped its spoon and started sobbing. The girl Megan picked it up and tried her best to soothe the toddler.

As if nothing had happened, the miller's wife pointed towards Lizzie and said: "This young lady has just delivered your order from Jonah Chaundeler, who is her uncle. It's there, on the dresser, waiting for you." With that she filled another mug with milk, cut off an extra large slice of the cake and pushed them across the table towards him.

"Oh, thank you," he said without opening the parcel, as if he were embarrassed by it. "It could have waited."

One cheeky boy stuck his head around the door and all the while keeping his exit clear, said: "He likes his genever, does our pa'..." and he was gone again, not waiting for the inevitable telling-off.

"That boy is getting too cheeky for his own good," said the miller.

As if to excuse her husband's weakness for genever, the Dutch gin, his wife added: "It's very dusty in the mill. He needs his throat clearing now and then."

Lizzie wondered what it all meant, and remembered the woodsman's wife had made a similar comment.

"I'm supposed to bring back the two shillings, said Uncle Jonah," Lizzie blurted out when it was time to go.

"I'll settle with your uncle, next time I'm passing," said the miller.

"No you don't, Will Taylor, you pay the young lady here and now after her long trip – it's the least she deserves. And my dear, I noticed how you liked my cake. Megan, will you fetch the young lady a fresh loaf? We won't miss it. There, that's for the journey. And thanks for the company."

The miller had left the room mumbling under his breath, but returned instantly with two shillings and handed them to Lizzie. "Mind you don't

lose them now, my girl. How are you travelling?"

"I have my donkey and trap," said Lizzie, "and Aunt Hilda has sewn a pocket into my petticoat. So thank you kind lady and sir." She thought it only fitting to address her hosts in a similar way that the woman had addressed her.

"Oh my, me a lady? I've never been called that. You travel home safely, now, young lady yourself, and come back any time you're passing, d'you hear? And don't get lost. There's ghosts there on them marshes!"



# Ghosts of the Marshes

Lizzie hid the coins in her petticoat, placed the drowsy owl beside her and said her goodbyes. The loaf of fresh bread replaced Uncle Jonah's owl under her seat. Most of the children waved as she went. The oldest girl waved her baby brother's little hand.

As soon as they were out of sight of the mill, Spotty rejoined them. Lizzie felt quite pleased with herself and was so glad to see the friendly creature, she jumped down from the cart to hug it. As she looked up, Stubborn trotted on, going a little faster, turning off the rough path towards the willows where soft grass beckoned.

"Come back this instant, Stubborn!" Lizzie and the deer ran after the cart, but the donkey stayed true to its name. Lizzie grabbed at the reins and pulling hard, she stumbled and landed close to the water's edge. As she got up, she could see into one of the hollow old willows and glimpsed a number of casks, tied together with string. It was above the high water line and could not be seen from the road. There were some packets too, all tied up in oilskins to protect them from the weather.

"Oh, Spotty, what am I going to do? Should I load all this on to the cart and take it back? But that would be stealing. Besides, take them back to whom? Whoever has left these things here has gone to great lengths to hide them."

Having snatched at whatever it was that had taken its fancy, Stubborn finally hurried along a little. Lizzie decided she would hurry home tell her father about her find. Just then something else on the horizon caught her eyes and she sat stock-still. She had heard all the stories about ghosts that made no sounds and demons on the marshes which moved over the inlets at night and then vanished, sometimes taking people with them. Some people even insisted they had seen things in broad daylight, especially on days like this when the sea mist was rolling in silently from the mouth of the river, where the great sea serpent waited.



People were always saying things that were frightening. Lizzie had grown up with such stories. Uncle Jonah was an expert at telling tall tales. She had got used to them, she thought. Until now. Now she'd seen it for herself. *What as it? It seemed to resemble a man!* She was disappointed by her reaction. One minute the black-grey image had hovered in the dusk, the next it had disappeared. Gone. Swallowed up by the mist, or the sea, or maybe the sea serpent?

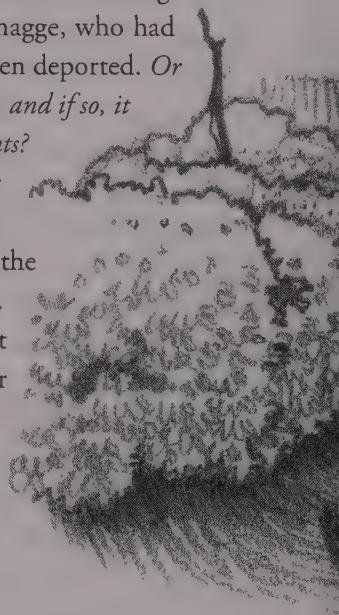
Something else bothered Lizzie. She tried to put it from her mind. Her father was out there. Somewhere. In the fast cutter that was meant to catch up with the smugglers. But the smugglers were resourceful and dangerous. They would shoot sooner than be caught.

At least she had heard no shots. Lizzie shivered. The thought of her father brought back life to her limbs. She could move again. Yet something wasn't right, something she could not or would not admit. No birds were singing. All was eerily quiet. The image had been as in a shadow theatre she had seen once at the fair.

The realisation struck Lizzie like a thunderbolt. She went cold, though the evening was still warm. Instantly, she was cross with herself for even thinking such nonsense. But she couldn't shake off the thought. The ghost had resembled that nasty murderer Sam Smagge, who had accused Stefan. But she knew Sam Smagge had been deported. *Or maybe the rumours were true and he had been killed, and if so, it had to be his ghost that had returned to his old haunts?*

With one last hurried glance over her shoulder into the swirling sea mist Lizzie hastened Stubborn, who for once really tried to speed up a little, back to the cottage and Aunt Hilda, with the deer running ahead.

"Promise you won't laugh," said Lizzie, not wanting to appear foolish, as she told her father about her supernatural experience. "I think I saw the ghost of Sam Smagge floating out over the marsh before I reached home. It gave me quite a fright."





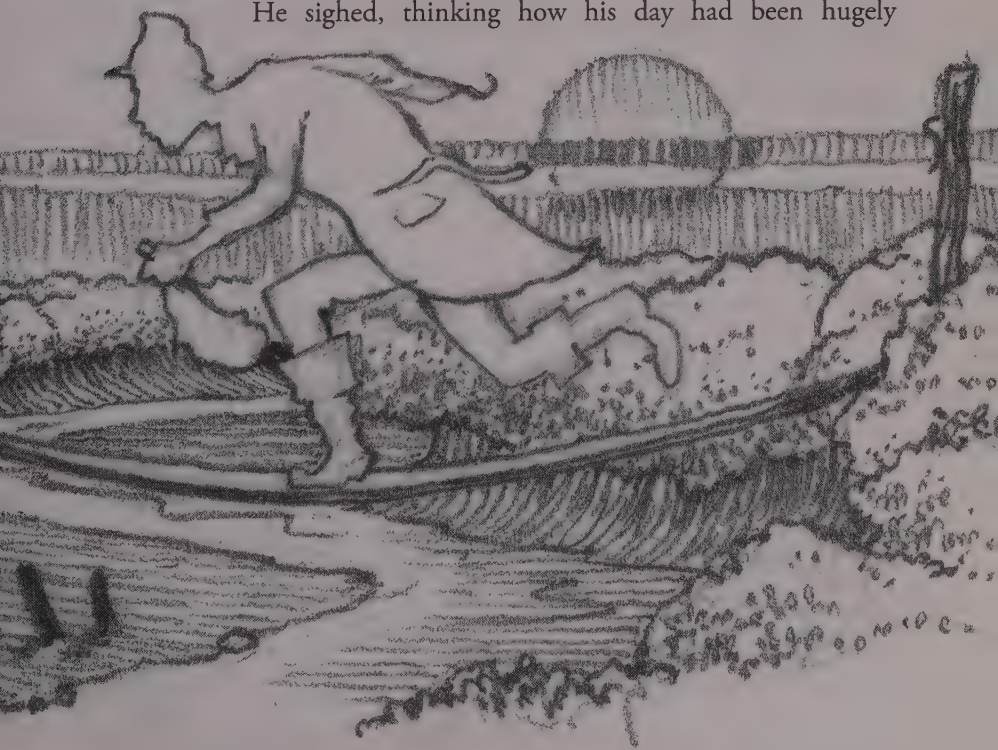
Her father did not sound too surprised. "You may well have seen something. Bushes tumbling about in the wind can look for all the world like odd shapes in twilight, and deer or stags have been known to get trapped in the mud. Such things can fire a young imagination."

Lizzie persisted there had been no wind and she knew what deer looked like.

"Of course, it might well have been someone of flesh and blood," her father admitted in answer to her insistence. "Notorious cross-eyed Jack, perhaps?"

He instantly regretted mentioning his name and tried to allay her fears: "People are always telling stories of seeing strange things out on the marshes. There are plenty of tales of Black Shuck, the large pagan dog of the Norse god Odin, that has roamed the land since time immemorial - or at least since the Vikings came and plundered these shores - and people say it is seen out on moonlit nights. When it howls, people will not leave their cottages. But these are only stories, Lizzie, usually stories that might disguise illegal activities some people do not want others to witness."

He sighed, thinking how his day had been hugely





disappointing. He'd sent out his men to scour the riverbank and the trees on the way to the mill that Lizzie had described, but they had found nothing. If Lizzie had been seen, they were likely to have removed their stash during the night. He must ensure she did not travel out again alone. But he also didn't want to worry her.

"I wouldn't worry your head about having seen Sam Smagge," her father comforted her. "From a distance, one villain looks much like another. Given time, most of the sightings out on the flats can be explained."

Lizzie did not argue any further. *Most can be explained?* she thought, *but what about the rest?* Though her father had tried his best to reassure her, Lizzie knew what she had seen with her own eyes.



# The Brimstone Saltings Mystery

The Inspector had become known for his tough and relentless ways, feared by even the most daring of the smuggling fraternity. This time, however, he was going to have to admit defeat. Perhaps the smuggler had drowned? he tried to convince himself. No, cross-eyed Jack was far too cunning a scoundrel for that.

Looking across the wide expanse of mud in front of him, he wondered where cross-eyed Jack had disappeared to? One minute the smuggler had been there in front of him, running towards the open water, the next – nothing.

Standing still now meant the Inspector was sinking into the mud. He realised that the moment he attempted another step forward. The more he struggled, the more the mud sucked at his boots, pulling him in deeper and deeper.

“Get back to the boat someone,” he growled to his men, “and throw me a rope. And hurry!” He hated having to admit that he’d ignored his own oft-repeated advice: “Don’t trust the marshes. Don’t get stuck. Like as not you’ll lose your boots at the least.”

He knew none of them would dare enter the maze of muddy veins that made up the marshes at Brimstone Saltings. At least his call was acted upon with some speed.

Out of sight, cross-eyed Jack was undaunted. “Best be prepared,” was his motto. For many years, anything he could lay his hands on in the way of flotsam – tree stumps, tree roots, branches, beams and planks from seaweed-encrusted wrecks, he collected and transported out onto the marshes. There he’d wedged them with stakes and connected them with ropes, which became invisibly embedded in the mud, acting as bridges and foot-holds at strategic positions. He laid them out so that they were



not obtrusive nor in a straight line and were well below high water line, creating a secret zigzag path across what would otherwise be treacherous salt marsh. And he knew his marshes. Three feet right, two left, one giant leap straight forward, three left again, careful not to lose balance!

Remembering contours, shapes and distances, stepping barefoot from island to squelching island, knowing where to find his hidden supports, meant at high tide it appeared as though he was walking on water to anyone unfortunate or daring enough to venture forth on moonlit nights near the marshes. It had earned cross-eyed Jack a grudging respect among the other smugglers and gave the marshes a reputation for ghostly apparitions. Jack and his mates were keen to exploit, spread and add to those tales of the ghostly marshes in order to keep others away.

He had one more secret that not even the other smugglers knew anything about. Out in the middle of the vast area of Brimstone Saltings a barge, upside-down and abandoned, had been decaying for years. Though it was sinking slowly over time, cross-eyed Jack knew the barge wreck never got completely covered at high tide. That's how he'd discovered that loose planks allowed him to wriggle into its inner space and how in his youth he had used it many a time as a refuge from his drunken father.

Later, when he was hiding from the law, he had built a floor with the aid of bales of straw, reeds and twigs brought in on dark nights, a platform that would float up inside with the tides and keep him unseen and in reasonable comfort under the upturned keel. As the entrance was below the high water line, outwardly it was no more than an abandoned wreck, turned over by freak winds and tides, and left to decay to slowly sink beneath the tidal mud. But with well-corked and oil-skinned provisions inside kept high and dry, Jack was always prepared for long days of hiding out. It came in useful now.

When the revenue men came in pursuit, he took delight in knowing he was dodging them, and how they would assume he was rushing headlong towards his doom. They would be in awe of his dexterity. Being light and sprightly helped him move quickly, as did his use of his hidden network of footholds.



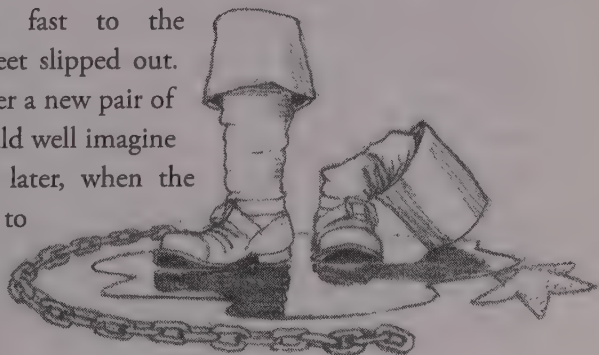
All the time he had kept an eye on his pursuers, as he was not carrying his pistol. The Inspector's gun had fired, but missed him. When he noticed the revenue man stumble momentarily, Jack threw himself headlong into the nearest channel and slithered like an eel into the next rill, just in case he had been seen. Lying flat, with his weight distributed, he could not sink. Still, he was grateful that the night was drawing in and a sea mist was rolling up from the open water. He needn't have worried.

The Inspector had problems of his own. He'd ventured another squelching step and sank to his knees into the mud. He should have known better. Darn it! Cross-eyed Jack couldn't have just disappeared. It was as if there never had been a smuggler. As if the marshes had swallowed him up in their wide, flat, impenetrable mocking emptiness. But there was nothing else the Inspector could do. He sighed as he grabbed for the rope his companions threw to him.

Nothing as far as one could see but islands of sea lavender and sea asters, bare mud and salt water. And even that became paler as the sea mist thickened. A coot called to its mate. A cuckoo jeered from a thicket a safe distance away. Sound carries well on a still surface. Some seagulls squabbled, otherwise all was quiet.

Perhaps that accursed smuggler had come to a muddy end out there somewhere? Perhaps the bullet had found its moving target after all? Or would slippery Jack be having the time of his life watching him being thrown a rope and dragged back to safe ground with the help of several men?

The suction held fast to the Inspector's boots. His feet slipped out. *Bother!* He'd have to order a new pair of boots tomorrow. He could well imagine slippery Jack returning later, when the coast would be clear, to retrieve the expensive boots. *Curse that smuggler!* With a dull



squelching noise and the combined pull of his men, the marsh mud, at last, released his feet. As he reached dry land, his legs and much of his body were covered in mud.

"This time he's found his match," shouted one of the revenue men, with glee.

"Don't you believe it," said the Inspector. "That fellow's as slippery as a cat, and is out there, somewhere. He hasn't used up his nine lives yet either."

The Inspector was annoyed with himself. Tomorrow, at high tide, he'd send someone out in a flat-bottom rowing-boat, just in case. For now it was all he could do.

Out on the marshes, in the half-light, cross-eyed Jack had reached the hide-covered coracle he kept tethered and hidden for just such an emergency. He slithered over the low rim and waited for darkness and the tide to rise. Then, lying flat on his belly, he trailed his arms outward in the shape of a cross and his hands over the rim into the water. Not even an oar was needed. In this way he was able to propel himself forward while hardly disturbing the water and without making a sound. Dry clothes, bread and brandy awaited him in his up-turned boat-wreck hideaway, as well as his vast collection of ropes. Cross-eyed Jack loved ropes. He'd collected ropes for as long as he could remember.

Soon after these events the Smagge boys' attitude towards Lizzie changed. They stopped teasing her cruelly with names like 'witch' and 'Gypsy lover' and instead took to grinning at her with superior imbecilic grins. Something else had changed.

It wasn't until her aunt mentioned how the boys' father had inherited Sam Smagge's farm on Candy Island that Lizzie began to understand their change in attitude. It seemed her part in the conviction and transportation of their Uncle Sam had brought them all good fortune. They were no longer barefoot and were wearing boots now, a sign how much better off they were. Though, she thought, it had done nothing to improve their manners. She just smiled back at them as usual. Little did she know what they were planning for her.





## “Heart of Oak are our Ships.”

It was a day for rainbows. Spits and spats of raindrops splattered on the flapping, rust-coloured sails, while here and there the sun tried stealthily to caress the land, the lush green trees on the high ground, the over-ripe fields on the slopes and downs and a flock of sea birds on the quiet marshes below. The river itself sparkled in silvery patches whenever and wherever the sun managed to send a beam of light through the clouds onto the water.

The wooden barge creaked as it sailed, deep in the water with the weight it carried. The sails flapped as they zigzagged against the breeze, but with the flow of the water.

“Our vessel is laid up with repairs and I’ve got business in Cockleton. To give the horse a rest I’m going by barge with James Mathews. Would you like to come on the ‘Happy-Go-Lucky’?” her father asked.

Expecting she would, he had already arranged permission for her to miss school for a day. Lizzie could hardly contain her excitement – a trip with her father, even if it only was a short one on a cargo barge, a hoy, to neighbouring Cockleton was something she would not want to miss.

Lizzie knew the young apprentice bargeman from school. Alexander Mathews was in his last year at school, but didn’t attend regularly, as he often helped out on the barge. He smiled shyly at Lizzie, but then livened up a little when she showed an interest in the grazing sheep as the hoy passed by a small shed over on the edge of Candy Island.

Without saying a word, the boy nodded and handed her his father’s spyglass. Lizzie raised it to her eye as she had often seen her father do, and saw there were not only sheep, but a boy walking about with what looked like a small stool tied to his seat and a milking bucket in his hand. Then



she noticed another boy, sitting down beside a woolly ewe. As he stood up, he too had a stool tied conveniently to his behind. One after another they went with their buckets from ewe to ewe.

"That's Candy Wick. Them there's the Smagge boys from school," said Alexander. "Living on Candy Island now. Fine and dandy," he added, proud of his local knowledge. "But their cheeses are very good," he said with a grimace, which gave Lizzie the impression that he thought a hoyman's work to be vastly superior to that of a milking boy's any day.

Lizzie handed back the spyglass and thanked him politely as they left Candy behind and sailed out into the open river channel.

"Talk in the village says you've been to sea in an East Indiaman, for the East India Company, Mr Masters," James Mathews said, while he steered his hoy downriver towards Cockleton. "Small beer, then, a hoy." They were carrying a full load of tree trunks for delivery to the Cockleton shipbuilders, and there was little enough space for his passengers. It wasn't a comfortable journey, but it was convenient. "What made you stay land-bound?"

"The open sea took me away too much. India is a long way. And there is young Lizzie here. Wish I had spent more time at home earlier with my wife, God bless her. Now it's too late. Still, I can be here for my daughter now," he smiled, before starting on a question of his own: "What stopped you from fishing? Oysters, wasn't it?"

"Oh, no. We went out properly, after herring and such."

"I didn't know. So you've been out in the rough yoursen then, in all weather?"

James Mathews stood by the wheel and took on the stance of a grizzled old sailor, pulling a face: "Aye," he said with a twang, "you throw your nets where the gannets dive, then drift with the nets, for a fine catch of herring." He growled, then relaxed again, laughing. "Had a young wife, too. Spent too much time away. She died in childbirth with our first 'un. The next three died of the marsh fever, like yourn."

"Still, you've made a name for yourself, Churchwarden and all."

"I've had my chances. I've often been tempted to carry the odd favour,



mind. Very tempted. That's why I'm both a farmer and a hoyman. Being honest doesn't pay in this world."

"But it makes you a happy man," suggested Lizzie's father. "All those many mouths to fill wouldn't have anything to do with having to work hard?"

"Well, yes, they're a great help on the farm to my eldest. Alexander here helps out on the barge whenever school allows. It's something I set great store by – schooling. Still, he'll never be Overseer or Churchwarden with his intellect. His brother William is the one for learning." He turned to Lizzie: "And I understand that you have joined the boys at school. A girl with an education, it's such a waste."

Lizzie was furious, but she did not show it. Instead she said seriously: "I might become a physician and have to save your life, would you object to that?"

James Mathews was taken aback. He thought for a moment, then nodded. "Putting it like that..." he said without finishing his sentence. Moments later he added: "Maybe I'm meeting the wrong kind of women. All they ever want is to find a husband. You go ahead young lady and study, but don't forget to come back one day and save my life." His infectious laughter had the whole company merry with mirth and instantly he started his song again, while his son moved the great horizontal boom of the main sail and tied the ropes, tacking against the wind:

*'Heart of oak are our ships,*

*Heart of oak are our men.'*

He had a baritone voice, fine and loud. A voice echoed across the water from another barge that crossed their path in the opposite direction. "Knew it was you, Mathews, even afore I saw your colours."

Lizzie glanced up at the flag on the top mast – a stork on a yellow background – and recognised it as the gift Oysterfleet's Reverend had given Mathews after bringing in most of the hoyman's many children to church for baptism.

James Mathews finished his song before he shouted back: "Can't stop! Important cargo to deliver." With that he pointed to Lizzie and her father.



The other hoyman picked up a spyglass, then quickly disappeared below deck. He came back moments later to add another sail for a speedier journey upriver, obviously intent on putting more distance between their two vessels. Luckily the wind was with him.

Mathews laughed. Lizzie's father joined in: "Does everybody except you have a bad conscience on the river?"

"Well, times are hard. You can't really blame folks, you know."

"I don't suppose there's any point in asking you for special tips and hiding places, James Mathews," Lizzie's father said, seriously. "I have to ask."

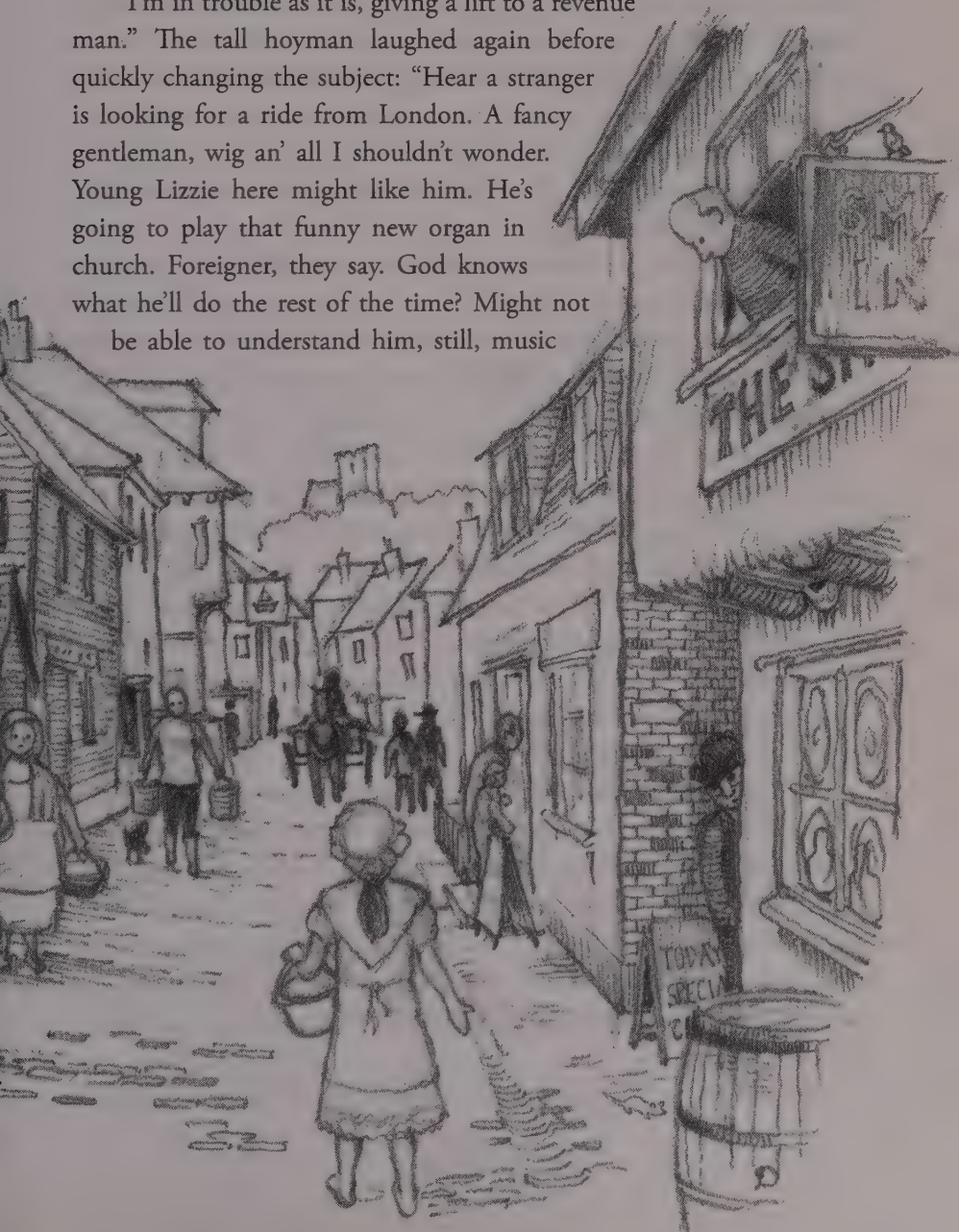




"People trust you if you're honest," the hoyman answered just as seriously, "but I've still got to live here, and so has my family."

"Thought so," said Lizzie's father, "but I had to ask."

"I'm in trouble as it is, giving a lift to a revenue man." The tall hoyman laughed again before quickly changing the subject: "Hear a stranger is looking for a ride from London. A fancy gentleman, wig an' all I shouldn't wonder. Young Lizzie here might like him. He's going to play that funny new organ in church. Foreigner, they say. God knows what he'll do the rest of the time? Might not be able to understand him, still, music





knows no borders." And again he burst into song.

"I'd like to play music," said Lizzie, "perhaps he'll teach at school?"

She had pulled a shawl over her head in a sudden squall. Moments later the sun came out again, just as they tacked into Cockleton harbour. Various ships lay at anchor, oyster boats were bobbing on the water close to shore and on the land along the edge of the water boats stood in various stages of completion, held upright and supported by staves.

People were waiting for them to unload the cargo.

"This used to be a great port," said Lizzie's father.

"Some still remember large men-o'-war lying up here," added James Mathews, "it's all such a shame, the harbour silting up."

Lizzie's father pointed out the Custom Office, where his business would be, "And over there, that fine brick building, that's where the famous Haddocks, the sea captains were born. It's an ale house now." He sighed.

Behind the busy waterfront, the village crept up the slope to the mighty church with its embattled tower that stood like a guardian above them. Just then a rainbow framed the picture and Lizzie pressed her father's hand: "Thank you for bringing me."

"Oh," said her father, "I've got an ulterior motive. Aunt Hilda's birthday is coming up and I thought you might be able to find a present for her in the town. Perhaps a new bonnet, for all the help she has given us? My business won't take all that long and I'll join you presently. You make a choice, you know, woman to woman."

He winked at Lizzie and she laughed: "I'll do my best, father."

Lizzie picked her way past the boat builders and chandlers, the sailmakers, the tarboilers and alehouses, and climbed the steep lane that led up to the shops and the church. Shading her eyes to look back into the sun, she was astonished just how wide the river was, seeing it from here. Ships of various sizes were travelling to or from London under full sail, one particular vessel being the type she had got to calling 'my father's kind of ship'.

For Lizzie this shopping trip was a new experience. There was so



much more to see in Cockleton than in her own village of Oysterfleet. Fine wooden houses lined the street. The butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker all had their stores here. Shoemakers and clothiers manned their stalls. Tantalising wafts of fresh bread mingled with the smells of oysters and herrings. A man shouldering a yoke with buckets full of cockles dangling at each end passed her by, looking surly under the weight.

Small-paned bow windows tried to entice the passing folks into the treasure coves beyond with displays and exhibits of wares. With her money in her petticoat, Lizzie was tempted several times, but it was Mrs Brewitt's Haberdashery, she was looking for.

A bell rang over the door as she entered. She found the shop a little gloomy at first, but as her eyes got used to the light, she saw Mrs Brewitt, dressed in a floral patterned calico gown, climbing carefully down from a step stool. The apron she was smoothing down was as white and crisp as the mop cap on her head.

Lizzie ventured forward, thinking Mrs Brewitt hadn't seen her. The shop was small and there was little enough room for several people, let alone the bolts of brocade, taffeta and brightly coloured cotton that lined the walls. Standing at last at the counter with its shimmering silks direct from Eastindiamen in London Docks, Lizzie marvelled that a shop could have shelves that went up so high. But it was the small draws in the front of the counter, full of gloves, ruffs, ribbons, bows, buckles and buttons, which claimed her attention. Those and of course, the straw bonnets.

Mrs Brewitt was obviously not used to children in her shop, at least not unaccompanied ones. The ample woman was polite and friendly, expecting Lizzie to carry some sort of message on an errand.

"Good morning," said Lizzie and smiled. "I should like to choose a bonnet."

"A bonnet? Oh, come now my girl, surely that is for your mother to do."

"It's for my Aunt Hilda. Hilda Chaundler of Oysterfleet. My father sent me."

"Your Aunt Hilda? Then you must be..."

"John Masters' daughter, madam, at your service," Lizzie said, proudly.

"Oh, I thought so. Why didn't I recognise you right away? Of course. You do look so like your poor mother."

"You used to know my mother?"

"Yes. Well, not to speak to, but many's the time she would walk past and look into my window and then hurry off when anyone saw her. And she such a lady in her fine frocks. With her delicate disposition, moving to such an unhealthy backwater down by Oysterfleet. Down by the marsh. Brrrr!"

Mrs Brewitt obviously did not think much of Lizzie's beloved marshes. "It's such a shame. She could have married any one of many suitors, rich young men, but no, she loved your father. And he only a poor sailor then. But my, how well he's done for himself. Revenue Inspector, eh? And here you are, looking so much like her. And you actually come into my humble establishment." She smiled then and clapped her hands together. "But what can I do for you, young lady?"

"Lizzie. My name is Lizzie. My father charged me to buy a bonnet for Aunt Hilda," Lizzie repeated her order.

"A bonnet, eh?"

"Yes, of the finest straw and with plenty of ribbons. It's her birthday soon and Aunt Hilda is always helping out."

"Oh, so we can expect your father, too, young Lizzie Masters?"

"No, I've got the money. He'll join me when his business is done."

The old lady seemed disappointed for a moment, but then she fussed: "Oh what an honour. The Inspector's daughter. And what is it your aunt might fancy?"

"A proper bonnet, I think," Lizzie said, pointing to a very fashionable hat with a flat crown and a wide brim. "That one might suit her fine." It was the most costly bonnet in the shop. Lizzie hoped Aunt Hilda would love it as much as she did.



# “The King needs men like you!”

Evening came and father and daughter walked back down to the ‘Happy-Go-Lucky’ on the quay, laden with an assortment of parcels. Music and boisterous sea shanties came from some of the quayside inns. Mathews, too, had completed his business, but he was anxious and agitated. He’d sent Alexander on an errand and the boy had not returned as instructed. He’d already checked the address of the errand. His son had been there and left again.

Lizzie’s father looked at James Mathews and said: “The lad is tall for his years, perhaps we better check the taverns, in case he’s met up with a press gang?”

“He knows better than that,” said Mathews, “but yes, perhaps.” They decided to start looking together.

Seeing the concern on her father’s face, Lizzie asked: “Alexander will be all right, won’t he?” She tried to keep up with the grown-ups.

“As long as he doesn’t accept the King’s shilling from the press gang.”

“What’s a press gang? What does that mean?”

“It means signing up for a life at sea. They might offer him a drink with the shilling hidden at the bottom of the tankard. And once he’s accepted the tankard... well many boys have been tricked like that and pressed into service for the Navy. You stick close by me, Lizzie, whatever happens,” said her father.

It did not take them long to find



Alexander in an alehouse near the quay, being plied with strong drink by members of a press gang. They did not notice them approaching in the crowded, noisy and smoke-filled room.

"No problem you can't spell your name, boy. Just make a cross here!" A burly rough fellow in a soiled uniform tried to press a writing feather into Alexander's hand. In his other hand he held a shiny new coin. A piece of paper was spread out on the trestle table in front of them.

"Here, boy, take the King's shilling and see the world. All those brown girls and foreign places just waiting for you."

Lizzie's father stood up to his full height, though he was no match to James Mathews in size. "I am John Masters, Inspector in the King's Service of Customs and Excise. I know this boy and he is under my protection."

The man tried to bluff his way out: "Only doing my duty, sir."

"Then ply your duty some other place. This boy is needed by his father to support a score of siblings. And you are exceeding your office, sir."

The press man's hand moved to his side, where his cutlass swung from a wide, stiff belt. James Mathews' large hand, equally stealthily, took hold of that hand and twisted it behind the man's back. Neither of them said a word, but the man gritted his teeth and looked defiantly at Lizzie's father.

"Well, well, we have trouble hearing, have we?" came John Masters' voice seriously, fixing the man's stare. Moments later James Mathews released his grip and the press man grimaced, rubbing his arm, then reluctantly stood back from the Inspector and doffed his hand to his cap.

"We have the right," he grumbled.

"Perhaps you would sign this paper yoursen? The King needs men like you out in the field, keen and fighting fit. Your place is not here with mere boys!"

That was enough. The others had already vanished quietly into the shadows. Now the last man, too, found it prudent to retire.





James Mathews took his son by the ear and marched him all the way back to the hoy. "Let that be a lesson to you, boy! You've had a lucky escape! And you can thank Mr Masters here."

Alexander struggled, unsure on his feet and slurring his words: "I c-couldn't help it. They k-kept pouring out drink." Then he was sick over the side of the barge, while Lizzie's father helped to manoeuvre them away from the quay and back into the deeper channel for the ride home.

"I can't thank you enough," said Alexander's father. "The boy's not the brightest, but maybe this will encourage him to learn. He will not lose another day of schooling if I can help it."

"Just you teach him to navigate honestly and not sail the wrong side of the law. I would hate to have to arrest him some day."

"He'll learn," said James Mathews.

"You can handle yourself," said John Masters, "I was impressed the way you stopped that fellow going for his cutlass. I hear they're active again up in the churchyard on Sundays."

Lizzie had kept close to her father, all the time holding on to Aunt Hilda's present. Seeing him for the first time in his official role, she had been proud of the way he had handled those ruffians. She also understood a little more of the dangers that faced him almost daily in his real job.

"What are they doing in the churchyard?" she wondered aloud.

"Oh, they wait by the church door after service on Sundays to whisk away any likely lads they can manage to trap. Those cutlasses are well sharpened. There is a stone there, where they spend their time sharpening them. And their knives."

Lizzie kept quiet. It was a dangerous world. She was glad her father was with her.

In the deep blackness of the night a myriad of stars were visible and the Milky Way led like a celestial highway along the horizon. All the sails were set to catch what little wind there was, but still their progress upriver was slow. The clouds had vanished at last and a full moon hung over the river like a big round lantern, throwing a path of light across the water.

Mathews had lit their own lantern, which swung merrily from the

mast and offered a small pool of light where the passengers sat.

"How do you know where we're going?" Lizzie asked curiously, wondering at the skill it took to skipper a boat in darkness.

"The stars, my dear, the stars," laughed the hoyman. "The night sky is full of signposts, if you know how to read them. There," he said, pointing, "that's the Great Wagon, those seven stars. Look up from the rear wheels and multiply their distance by four and you come to that bright star over there. That's the North Star, but your father will be able to explain that much better than I."

"Go on, you're doing excellently," said her father.

Again Mathews' fine voice rang out into the still night:

*"Her eyes are like two stars so bright,*

*Mark you well what I say.*

*Her eyes are like two stars so bright,*

*Her face is fair, her step is light.*

*I'll go no more a rovin', with you fair maid.*

*A roving, a roving, since roving's been my ru-i-in,*

*I'll go no more a roving, with you fair maid."*

Here and there, small dim lights along the near shore pointed out cottages and houses. One in particular caught Lizzie's attention. They were hugging the coast at the point where the channel to the Castle Mill turned in and they could just see the mill in the bright moonlight. A light shone in the nearest tree, plain to see. No, two lights close together, looked out to the river.

Lizzie was enchanted by the view of river and land in moonlight. "That's where I delivered one of Uncle Jonah's owls," she cried with some enthusiasm.

Her father asked James Mathews for a loan of his spyglass. He trained it in the direction of the tree and moments later said thoughtfully: "I think that is one of Uncle Jonah's owls. Must be some sort of signal that the coast is clear or that a delivery is required."

"Oh, dear, that's what those large hollow eyes were for – candles,"



Lizzie giggled. Then she added: "One of the miller's boys said his father liked his gin."

Soon after, some strange events began creating unease among the villagers. Horses in their paddocks were found to be in a sweat in the mornings as if they had been ridden all night. Food and clothing disappeared mysteriously. Thomas Barber's apothecary by the church had been robbed and bandages and pain killing medicine were missing. Even the schoolroom had been broken into.

Cross-eyed Jack's body then washed ashore downriver at Dead Man's Point. There was no mistake; it really was the renegade smuggler. He was barefoot and wore few clothes. Only one fact did not make sense – Jack had not died of the Inspector's bullet, he had been repeatedly stabbed. In the village, his death was just more proof that there was something unholy out there on the marshes.



# Bell Tower Silence

High winds were howling through the sycamore trees and about the dark yews of the churchyard, so wildly, the masons repairing the church tower and gargoyles were unable to work for days. The schoolroom was safe thanks to the thick walls, and the tall windows with colourful scenes from the Bible, which the children had to study. On sunny days, the whole of the room was made magical by the light that passed through the stained glass. Hues of colour, vermilion and ultramarine, emerald and purple then tinted the walls with the movement of the light.

Lizzie particularly liked the window with the raging sea and a curious fish that had a man in its mouth. In the storm and with the rain, the sea seemed even more dramatic. Her father had known such seas.

She pulled herself together, her thoughts had wandered so. There was little enough room for the children to squeeze into the small benches and trestles and at such close proximity, little escaped the teacher. Discipline was absolute and chastisement instant. The slight schoolmaster's ruler landed on their folded and sometimes outstretched hands at the slightest misdemeanour. There were always anxious moments whenever he removed the funny little iron-rimmed spectacles from the top of his nose. Maybe it was because she was a girl, or more probably because she was obviously under the protection of the Squire, or maybe even because she gave little cause, but Lizzie seemed to fare better than most of the boys. Not that anyone would have said that openly in so many words.

The Smagge brothers had become more friendly than was necessary. Lizzie had her suspicions at first, but the boys were often absent and as time passed, all had settled down to normal. When one of them hinted at seeing an owl on the broken tower of the church, Lizzie at first paid little attention: "That's not unusual. Owls like old buildings. They're safe up there."



On one particular day, before school, they mentioned the owl again, insisting it was trapped up there, high on the scaffolding.

"Ah, she's not interested," one brother suggested, "not when it's so high up on the tower and she's so high and mighty. That's not for girls."

"Yes, I am interested," Lizzie was adamant, "just you show me where it is. If the owl is in trouble, I'd like to help." She was going to call their bluff. Then one of them pressed an owl feather towards her during lesson. The teacher noticed and a stinging blow from his ruler to the lad's hand followed. The boy bit his lip and kept silent.

Shortly before the end of class the teacher began to cough uncontrollably. He was not a healthy man and he asked the more sensible of the older boys to end the class and close up before he left. That's when the Smagge boys saw their chance. They stayed behind and so did Lizzie. When the others streamed down the winding stairs and out of the church door for home, they sneaked back to the door of the tower. Like conspirators, they pulled back the heavy bolt and started on the narrow stairs that followed the inside wall of the tower. Suddenly the boys stopped, pushed Lizzie forward, jumped back and closed the door behind her, throwing the heavy bolt forward again on the outside.

Lizzie could hear them laughing on the other side of the heavy oak door. "Let me out!" she shouted and banged against the solid wood frantically with her fists. Again she shouted in desperation: "Let me out this instant!" All went silent then, except for the wind that echoed about inside the tower. It was dark behind the door. Dark and cold.

"Help me, please." Her voice faltered as she remembered where she was and knew it would be useless to scream. No one would hear her in the empty church. For long moments she sat down on the bare dank steps behind her. It smelled musty and stale in that ancient and little used environment. Slowly her mood changed to one of anger, mainly at herself, for falling to the boys' ploy. Above her was a chink of light from the narrow slits in the thick stone tower wall.

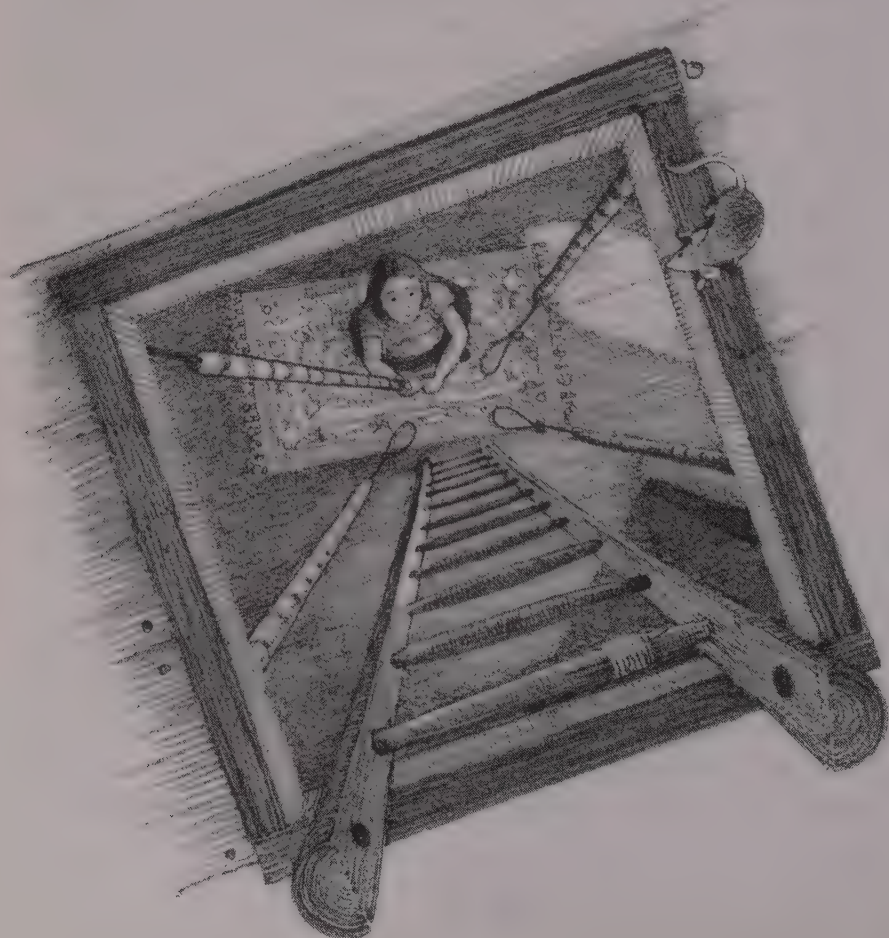
She climbed a few steps towards that dim light and then a few more steps to another one, stumbling. Her skirts got in the way and she raised





them with one hand, while her free hand reached out into cobwebs. It got a little brighter then, and as she came to the top of the staircase she found herself in a narrow and dusty tower room, with a ceiling so high, she could barely see it in the gloom. Long ropes hung from an almost invisible ceiling and she knew she was in the place the bell ringers used when the church bells had to be rung before church services, on Sundays and on King George's birthday. The ropes were the bell ropes.

There was one more feature in that strange room – a ladder against one of the walls, that stood free and reached right up to where the bell ropes began. It seemed a frightening height. But if she climbed up there, to where the bells summoned the villagers from across the fields and the



creek to church, perhaps she could shout down? Her heart leapt at the thought of escape, but fell just as quickly. Who would hear her from up there in this wind? The very thought of that high ladder made her shiver. Yet, people did climb it when repairs were needed to the bells and the gargoyles.

*The gargoyles!*

Her breath caught in her throat as she realised just how close she was to them up there. In her determination to get out of the tower, she had forgotten that the gargoyles were up there with the bells. For a moment she was cross with herself. The gargoyles were on the outside and there were thick walls between. Why should she be afraid? *Because you are alone in this prison and there is nobody who can help you.* A small voice inside her would not be silenced.

At that moment Lizzie felt more lonely and helpless than she had felt even when her mother died. The gusts of wind sounded sinister, causing the sturdy old beams above her to creak, as the storm tried to move the heavy bells. Were those whispers she could hear? Strange and unfamiliar sounds echoed off the old cold stone walls. Clasping her hands over her ears she sat down on the lower rung of that enormous ladder, trying to shut out the awful drone of the wind and the whispers and the scratching sounds above her as if someone was shifting about. Were those footsteps she heard? Or curses? Were the gargoyles moving about? What did they want? She closed her eyes, but that made it worse.

Something clattered to the floor behind her and the rung on which she sat began to quiver and shake. A shudder ran down the length of the roped-together ladders that made her shoot forward and stand up, shaking. Slowly she looked up, terrified and squinting through half-open eyelids.

She could see something move up there in the gloom. There was a patch getting brighter than the rest of that cobweb ceiling where the ladder ended. The trap door had opened.

Someone or something was coming down the ladder.

*Mother protect me!* Lizzie's heart made a leap and seemed to beat in



her throat. She wanted to scream, but no sound came. Instead she flung herself at one of the ropes, jumping as high as she could and pulling with all her weight. Slowly, far too slowly, the rope gave way and she sank to the floor. She jumped up again, holding fast and dangled her weight. The next time she pulled on the rope, she rose off the ground with the momentum and way above her the bell began to toll its high tenor sound. For a moment at least it drowned out other noise. Again and again she leapt up with the rope to ring the bell.

She concentrated on her task so much, at first Lizzie did not realise her name was being called. The voice got closer and all of a sudden she saw Aunt Hilda beside her. Lizzie threw her arms around her. Behind Aunt Hilda, Lizzie could see the concerned face of her teacher, who was coughing badly.

"What happened?" asked Aunt Hilda. "When you did not come home I asked around and nobody had seen you. I even asked Master Lazarus here and he was kind enough to come out and look, and in this weather. Then we heard the bell ringing out. Whatever are you doing up here?"

Lizzie looked up as they left, but saw nothing at the top of that ladder. It didn't take long for them to make their way back down to the bottom of the tower. Aunt Hilda slipped a warm shawl about Lizzie's shoulders and between them they helped the schoolmaster through the storm back to his home.

Inside Mr Lazarus' small cottage Aunt Hilda took charge. "What you need is a good rest and some of my warm tea and I'll be back later with some medicine for that awful cough. We'll soon have you back in class."

The Smagge brothers would keep, he told them, but they would not escape Master Lazarus.

When they had made the teacher comfortable, they left for the warm fire waiting in Aunt Hilda's hearth. With a sigh of relief Lizzie hugged her aunt as she explained her fear: "I could hear the gargoyles up there. I heard them shift about. I thought they were coming down to get me."



# The Grim Visitor

The ale house was unusually crowded as most boats and hoys in the area had been laid up for days. In the smoke-filled tavern, the men welcomed the worsening weather, as to the smugglers such risky weather was ideal and profitable. Their plan was to leave on a trip to Flushing with the morning tide. As they feasted on beer, bread and cheese, the talk among the men was about what to do about John Masters, the Revenue Inspector, who was making life difficult for every one of them.

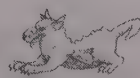
"He's got everyone rattled," the inn-keeper said, tongue-in-cheek. The smirk on his face needled Rattler, whose set of wooden teeth rattled as he spoke, hence his nickname.

But Rattler Morgan, the self-elected leader of 'Owlers', ignored the jibe. He was thinking about his bungled attempt at abducting the Inspector's daughter. Why, the Inspector wasn't even worried enough to stop her driving about the countryside with her silly donkey and cart and her animals. Still, he wouldn't know how their smuggling gang named the 'Owlers' delivered contraband using the signs of owls, communicating with one another on dark nights unobtrusively by imitating the 'whohooo' sound of owls.

As they left for home, none of them took much notice of the hooded figure of a monk in a corner of the inglenook fireplace. As the tavern was right next to the quay, there were often strangers from outside ships dropping in and travellers or pilgrims on their way to Kent and Canterbury.

The Bones Brothers were superstitious at the best of times, but cross-eyed Jack's death had everyone on edge. "Had those really been knife marks on his corpse?" they asked. "Or perhaps teeth marks? And who would be next?"

The autumn mists had come down thicker than usual, making it



impossible to see two yards ahead even with a lantern, which they weren't carrying. Added to the moonless sky, it made for an eerie night.

"Damn it. It's as dark as in a cat's belly," Ezra Bones said, stumbling over his own feet as he faltered up East Street to their shack at the end of the village. His twin brother, Ebenezer, equally drunk, agreed with him, though they knew their way well enough blindfold.

Passing the churchyard, their floundering steps quickened.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a frightening figure stood before them, framed darkly against the dim light of a nearby window. They sensed him more than saw him. Hooded and unrecognisable, the apparition barred their way. In their befuddled state, they both fell to their knees.

"Spare me. Spare me," was all they were able to gurgle, thinking their time had come and the Grim Reaper was calling for them.

"Get up, you fools," the figure said roughly. "It's me, Sam Smagge. You never saw me. But I need food and clothes. And money. One of you will go home and fetch what you can find, the other stays here 'til it's done. I know where you live, so don't go a-thinkin' you can desert your brother and not return. And remember – you never saw me."

"I'll go," they both cried at the same time.

In the dark the figure shook one of the brothers by the shoulder: "You go! And be quick about it if you want to see your brother again. I don't exist any more, don't forget that."

The kneeling man got to his feet and wanted to say something, but the shadowy figure in front of him tied his tongue. Instead, he turned and ran as fast as his suddenly sobering legs would carry him.

His brother, still on his knees, asked shakily: "We really can go, when he comes back?"

"You better pray that he will," said the grim figure.

Something did not fit with Ebenezer Bone's idea of a demon or devil, even in his terrified state of mind. A devil would not ask him to pray, surely? So he grew bolder: "You said you're Sam Smagge. How can you be here when you're d...dead?"

"Because I've had my fill of all your bungling. I've come to take over





the business. They'll never find me. We'll operate at night. My brother owes me now. The sheep will cover our tracks. Wherever we go, the sheep will follow and no one will suspect our movements or be any the wiser," he rambled. Then he swore more ominously: "No Constable or Revenue Inspector is going to lay hands on me ever again. I'm going to deal with him. And that interfering brat of his." There was movement under that large dark cloak. "Take heed of this and don't forget I'll need sustenance. Stand up, you fool, and pray!"

Ebenezer stood up with his hands folded at his chest as in prayer, wishing he had not sinned so often, before he'd die. The figure caught his shaking hands with one hand, pushed his other arm forward from under the cloak and pressed it between the twin's praying fingers. There was no hand, only a rough stump covered by cloth that smelled awful.

Ebenezer fell to his knees again, now really petrified. "I, what can I...? How did you...?" he stammered.

"I had to get out of my shackles. And it was better than drowning."

Stumbling and out of breath, Ezra Bones returned moments later, carrying a small bundle. At least that's what he told his brother later.

"Ah, good," said the figure. "About time, too. Remember, you haven't seen me. I don't exist. But I'll be back for more. Don't tell the others to expect me. They'll find out where and when themselves."

And then he was gone. The men, in their state of panic, were babbling now. Sam Smagge had been deported or maybe killed. What strange power had brought his damaged ghost back to haunt them? They'd agreed to everything he said. You don't argue with the devil. Nor even a ghost.





## CHAPTER 17

# A Ship from the Indies

**T**he infamous Bones Brothers had become teetotal overnight. Well, temporarily at least.

"I'm never going to visit an inn again, I swear," whined Ebenezer.

"Nor touch alcohol ever again," promised Ezra.

They would not tell what had changed them so suddenly, but bit by bit their gruesome secrets came out: "The earth opened and the devil sprang up from the ground in front of us," was how they described the encounter later, when time had sufficiently dulled the memory and they could finally find the words. "Oh, it was terrible. We were forced on our knees and made to beg for our lives. He is one hungry devil."

The village was buzzing with conflicting news. The more timid spoke of a great calamity that was about to befall them. Strange signs and forebodings had been reported up at the old castle near the next village. Black Shuck had been seen near there. Odin's pagan hound with his slobbering fangs had been following travellers that came close and the

dog's howling had been heard great distances away, not least below on the lonely wicks of Candy Island. The very word 'pagan' sent some people indoors, as the devil would not be far behind.

Some said Black Shuck was the Devil himself in disguise, looking for souls to devour. Others were convinced it was the hound's teeth that had left their mark on cross-eyed Jack and, they asked themselves, who would be next to float downriver half chewed up and 'sorely drowned'?

The wild crags of the old castle walls, some of which had collapsed among the deformed trees, sent fear into many people. Unexplainable shadows had been seen wavering among the dark, bramble and ivy-covered ruins. Strange lights had flickered on its broken ramparts. It was said that the souls of prisoners who had died in its dungeons were up there, waiting to wreak their long awaited vengeance, making it unlucky to go anywhere near it, even in daylight. All of the sightings surely meant that something was about to happen.

But not everyone was so easily scared. Some grinned slyly, in the knowledge another shipment of contraband goods was to be expected shortly, as had happened on previous spooky occasions when the smugglers wanted a clear run without interference from the Law and nosy witnesses.

It was a few days before All Hallows' Eve when strange things out of their control happened. People still remembered the Squire's barn fire and the storm that had damaged the church tower now almost a year ago.

Late one afternoon small groups of people could be seen walking up the narrow cutting to the high heath near the castle ruins. Darkness falls early this late in October and some were carrying lanterns on sticks. Some had hollowed-out pumpkins and turnips with candles shining out of grotesque faces that had been cut into the hollowed-out skin to make them look doubly scary. Like gargoyles, they were supposed to keep away evil spirits.

The village had been buzzing with the news from further downriver that a large three-masted schooner was returning from the Indies and would be all lit up to announce its arrival. Some said it was the largest

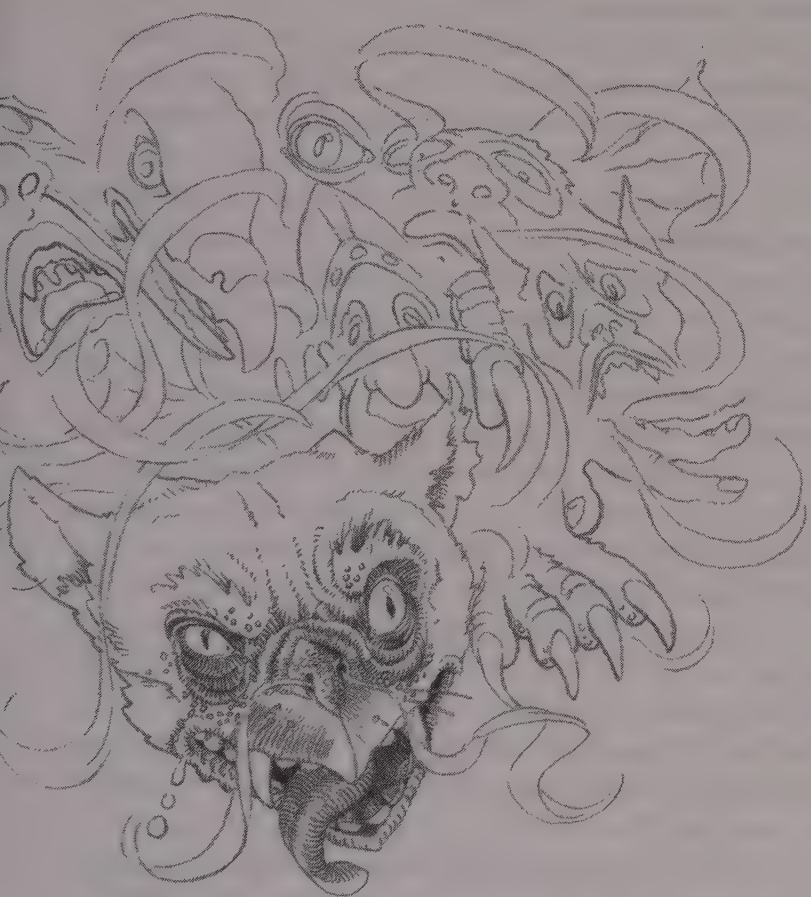


sailing ship ever seen on the Thames. Lizzie had begged Aunt Hilda to let her go up to the heath to see if it was bigger than the one her father had served on. Her father would only allow her to go in the company of Aunt Hilda, who had agreed.

There was almost a holiday atmosphere up on the heath lookout. They did not have long to wait before the ship could be seen in the distance. It was a large ship, but not so unusually large that its like had not been seen before. Still it was worth the wait as the ship grew larger and stories and guesses were whispered of the wild and wonderful places the crew would have seen on their travels to the other side of the world, so far removed from the gentle run of the barges and hoys they were used to. Soon, in the fast fading light, they could see the ship was being pulled upriver by two steam tugs, all with their lanterns swaying in the light breeze that fanned up from the river.

The unearthly howling of a dog broke the silence and made everyone shiver. Or perhaps it was the cold evening. Or both? The sound got louder







and more frantic. It pulled all eyes and attention away from the river. This was the real reason why people came here. They had heard the rumours of something unusual about to happen.

The pitiful noise came from the direction of the castle ruins and continued for several minutes, before flames could be seen. The now terrified onlookers became convinced the devil's hound was breathing fire.

Shadows were seen on the fire. Dipping and rising, they looked like dancing demons. The fire divided into several firebrands which, like living torches, leapt off in different directions, one even seemed to leap up into a tree, accompanied by terrifying howls and screams.

"It's a witches' Sabbath," whispered an elderly woman, "we ought not to be here." But she stayed and watched all the same.

Instantly the howling began again. Odin's hound had divided and become several individuals. Some of the smaller children began to cry.

"He's got three heads," someone cried, turning away and hiding her face with her hands. A tree caught fire. Small fires lit and died at different points, but one carried on some way moving erratically along the hill, before it turned towards the people from Oysterfleet. There was panic. The imp was coming for them. Its pitiful sounds grew louder. The people started running and screaming.

Now Aunt Hilda got worried. Lizzie had stood fascinated by her side, enjoying the spectacle, but just as she reached to grab her niece's hand to take her away from the scene, something had caught Lizzie's eye.

"A fox. It's a fox with a burning tail," shouted Lizzie and leapt down towards the woods and the panicking creature. Moments later she had disappeared in the half-light. Aunt Hilda didn't hesitate and set off in pursuit. She saw the fox leap over a fallen tree, or rather she heard it screeching and wailing and saw the firebrand leaping behind it. Suddenly the fire stopped still, stuck in the fork of a branch. Just for a moment Aunt Hilda caught sight of Lizzie pulling at it.

"Lizzie, please stop," she panted, but with that the fire dimmed and all went quiet. Eerily quiet. For a moment she thought she heard a muffled



cry, but she might have been mistaken. She called for Lizzie, arriving at the trunk only moments later, but there was nothing. A branch or broom still smouldered, but no fox, no fiery demon, nor any sight of Lizzie.

"Lizzie, where are you?" It was as if the night had swallowed her up. "Don't tease me, Lizzie! Lizzie..." Aunt Hilda shouted, panicking, when there was no answer. She cried, she pleaded with people, the last that were left, to come and help, to find her niece, but no one would. Everyone was rushing back down the hill now in fear of their own lives.

The next minute she was alone. All was quiet. The castle was silent. All the fires had died in the damp night. Aunt Hilda shouted until she lost her voice. She did not know what direction to search in the darkness, but she found her way back to the look-out point. All she found there were discarded Jack-O'Lanterns, one of which still had its candle burning in a silly grimace. In a fit of desperation Aunt Hilda grabbed the grinning pumpkin and threw it back towards the castle, but the candle extinguished in mid-air and she was alone again in the dark.

Down on the black snake that was the river the pinpoint lights of the large ship and the low tugboats that pulled it had passed. The lights flickered in their reflections on the dark water, but no one had stayed to watch.

Aunt Hilda sat there for what seemed like ages, crying and blaming herself for bringing Lizzie up there, until she decided it would be better to alert Lizzie's father and get help. In utter helplessness she picked her way back down the hill.

On such a night the Inspector was especially busy. It was a good night to catch smugglers for, as he rightly assumed, on a night without a moon and with almost half the village watching the ghostly goings-on up at the castle, he'd be sure to apprehend villains who'd use such tricks to do their business while others' backs were turned.

It was almost morning before he returned to Aunt Hilda's house, and as he presumed, to Lizzie. Finding his daughter missing and his sister in tears he tried to reassure her, he wouldn't leave a stone unturned to find the girl.

He left again immediately, tired as he was, to gather those of his men he could reach at a reasonable distance. Riding up in force, they searched the woods all about the area of the vantage point with their storm lanterns. They even found the half-burnt brush that, Aunt Hilda had said, leapt across the forest floor. On finding a loop attached, the men concluded it had been tied to something, very likely to the tail of a fox. Red hairs were still caught in the loop.

Morning was breaking over the wide river mouth beyond when the men stealthily approached the old castle ruins, pistols drawn. They were confronted by a large hound that had been starved and pitifully tortured to produce the sounds that would frighten the people who came too close. The poor creature had to be shot to stop further pain.

There was evidence of a fire, some empty wicker cages and bits of brushwood left over from the brooms that had been tied to the poor caged foxes before they had been set alight and freed. There was no sign of the cruel hoaxers.

In the early light, Lizzie's father sat down disappointed, chin in hand, trying to think, while the men respectfully awaited their orders. As he sat there alone, he noticed something about the wall he was sitting next to. He had long suspected the ruins were used by criminals.

"Let's remove that wall," he said finally in frustration, pointing to a part of the ruins that appeared roughly built with less expertise than the rest of the old structure.

The men were tired, but when the Inspector set to work with a will and his bare hands, they made another special effort. They were well rewarded, though disappointed if they had hoped that somehow Lizzie might have found her way there. Behind the fake wall the underground dungeon was brimful of casks, and barrels of gin and brandy, bundles of Brussels lace and Holland cloth and packages of expensive tea.

"This must be the base of the notorious Gregory Gang," said one of the men, though Lizzie's father found little joy in his find.

The early sun illuminated a busy scene at the old castle ruins, as more men and horses had been called in from the Custom House in Cockleton,

where the large haul of stash was taken for safe keeping. The Inspector had greater worries.

All the next day, Lizzie's father and his men, the Constable and even the Squire's men searched every house, cottage, farm, barn, outhouse, shed and ship in the village, as well as the creek and the surrounding area. Meanwhile several of the village ladies went to assist Aunt Hilda who had taken to her bed totally inconsolable. Lizzie's father offered a reward to anyone with any news of his daughter. It prompted the rest of the villagers to join in the search.

There were many theories of what might have happened, which grew wilder by the hour. Those that had been up at the lookout were most frightened. It could just as easily have been anyone of them who had disappeared, they protested, though secretly they were glad it wasn't.

Some began to say that it was Lizzie who the demon had come for especially. She had rushed towards it when she recognised it and had taken off with it. Rattler Morgan's son Isaac felt very brave. He had looked back just as Aunt Hilda threw the grinning pumpkin into the dark night. Now he was certain he had seen sparks flying through the air when Lizzie and the demon had taken flight.

"They were probably on a witch's broom," added his mother, Mrs Morgan confidently, nodding her head and blinking knowingly with one eye. "Off to a witches' dance, I shouldn't wonder. There's never a witch finder about when he's needed to find and swim a witch."



## “Does that mean you have no soul?”

There were no more tears. Cold, tied and blindfolded, Lizzie felt more alone than ever in her young life. No mother, no father, no Aunt Hilda, no animal friends to cuddle up to. Misery and hopelessness had taken over. Where was she? What was happening? Everything was confused. Her body shivered with cold. Her whole being seemed to be shaking. It wasn't easy, but she tried to collect her thoughts, tried to remember what had happened.

Confined and roughly thrown over a shoulder, she had been bumped and battered downhill, only to be unceremoniously dumped into a small boat and rowed and rowed by someone or something strange and unusual. In the confining and foul-smelling place she had fainted – for how long, she did not know. Her captor must be of super-human strength, or extraordinary determination and had decided on a journey that seemed to have taken forever.

Whatever or whoever it was had been cursing and swearing at something that caused him – or it? – to row or push from the back of the small boat with great difficulty. It had to be a boat, she knew that much, even in her confusion. Nothing made sense. The sequence of things and events was quite jumbled. Almost subconsciously she struggled against her ties.

A cloth or something had been pushed into her mouth in the first moment of capture and her woolly shawl wound about her hooded head in haste to hold it in place. Something had been thrown over her head, holding her hands tightly inside her cloak and her legs had been tied or held with the open end of – a sack? A foul smelling rough canvas sack that reeked of shorn wool. Somehow, she had told herself, her abductor



had to be of flesh and blood. Then again she couldn't be sure. Sometimes it felt as if the ground beneath her was shaking.

Her body now ached all over and she felt damp. Her blindfold and the ties that held her hands and feet remained in place, but at least the smelly sack and her gag had been taken away.

"Don't want you chokin' after all this," her captor had growled at her, as he removed them. The voice had sounded strange, as with an echo.

A frightening thought occurred to Lizzie, as she remembered Uncle Jonah's story of the great sea serpent. Her heart almost stood still at the thought: *Am I in the belly of the great sea serpent?* But there again, that voice was a local one she'd heard before somewhere. Lizzie made up her mind, her abductor had to be human.

Another thought came to her mind and with it the slow realisation of just whose hands she might have fallen into. Yet with that suspicion came a calmness that surprised even herself. She tried to free herself by rolling sideways. It was impossible. She had been tied to something. Her hands and feet felt numb. And cold.

"It's no use, crying, nor shouting, nor hollering," grumbled the voice, "you're alone with me. No soul will hear you."

"Does that mean you haven't got a soul?" Lizzie sobbed.

The voice ignored her: "Not even your busybody father will be able to help, lest he stops his busybodyin'."

So he knew who she was. All this had been planned. Was he a smuggler? The voice did sound familiar.

"My father will find me," she said confidently now, as if it were the most certain thing in the world.

The answer came with the speed of a bullet: "Your father nothing. He'll do as he's told. Or it will be the end of you, you..." Then he added in a voice that tried to imitate the Squire: "Well, Milady, does my solution agree with you?"

For a moment Lizzie held her breath. So her captor had to be somebody who had been present at the village fair. Her earlier suspicions had been right. Sam Smagge! It had to be Sam Smagge, the man who had

accused Stefan of murder and who had been transported.

Lizzie cried out and sobbed to gain time. She had to think. If she accused him now, he might get nasty. Better to act the frightened little girl for now. After all, Sam Smagge was only human. *Or is this Sam Smagge's ghost?*

She started crying again, though she had no more tears. "I'm not a lady. I'm hurting."

"What's a little hurt to the pain I've suffered? And it's not over yet. But it will get better. And you will help me. That's only right an' proper. Yeah, right 'n' proper. Here is some bread, open your mouth. I need you alive for now."

Lizzie did not obey.

"Oh, please yoursen, it's no skin of my teeth, but you might get hungry in time. And thirsty."

Lizzie changed her mind. She needed to be strong, whatever it was or tasted like.

"I'd like some milk," she whimpered in a little girl voice.

"You'll have bread and water or nothing. I wasn't pampered either."

"But how can I eat or drink with my hands tied behind my back," she whimpered again.

There was a moment's silence, before her captor said: "If I untie your hands, do you promise not to do anything silly?"

"Oh, yes, I promise. My hands are numb." A rug or some kind of sheet had been thrown over her to keep out the cold. It did a poor job.

Her hands shook as she tried to accept the bread and chew on it. Some water was offered in a pitcher or cup. To help her drink, her captor lifted and supported her upper body a little. He smelled of the marsh, Lizzie decided, salty and tangy.

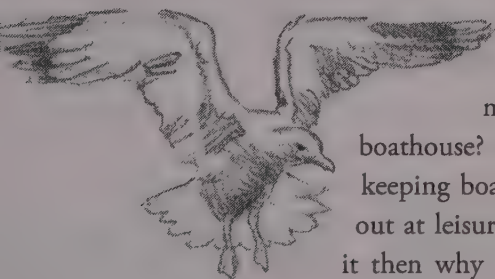
"Where am I?" She sobbed timidly but trying to sound friendly. "Why can't you tell me where I am? And what you want?"

"Never you mind, there is no way out. And you talk too much." Her captor cut her short. "And there's no point screaming! Only the sea serpent can hear you."



Had he been reading her thoughts? Or did he say that because that's where they were? Something else occurred to her. Whatever her captor did seemed to be with the same hand. He supported her either with his body or with the straight edge of a forearm. As if there was no hand. No hand! Maybe he had no hand on one arm?

Her suspicions were confirmed when her hands were tied again with great difficulty. Still wearing the blindfold, she could hardly move at all. Quietly she sobbed, there wasn't much else she could do. She was certain it would not soften her captor, but she needed time to think. Voices still sounded hollow, as if they were in a cave. Everything became unsteady whenever her captor moved. But she could hear birds calling. Sea birds. For a while she was too terrified to sleep. So she listened.



There was the constant splash of water. She shivered. Perhaps she was on a boat? But it did not move or rock, as a boat would. A boathouse? She had heard of rich people keeping boats under cover, so they could row out at leisure whenever they liked. If that was it then why was she sure she could smell the marshes? The horrors of the past few hours took their toll, as she drifted in and out of sleep and reality.

"Where am I?" she asked again in a timid voice.

"That's none of your interferin' business." The man cut her short. "You'll find out before..." Then he added sternly: "Don't try anything. You're safe for the moment, as long as you don't try anything. If you need bread or water, just lift your head. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Lizzie felt like crying but she had no tears left. What did he mean? She felt she had landed right in the middle of one of Uncle Jonah's stories. But Uncle Jonah's tales, however grim, always came out all right.



At that moment Lizzie made a decision. A brave decision, one that she knew would take every ounce of courage she had. She was going to survive. She was going to survive and live happily ever after. The world was beautiful and she was going to see more of it before she died. Lizzie focused on the sounds around her: gulls squabbling over some titbit, a coot, a sandpiper, and a flock of geese not far away, landing noisily, topped only by their incessant conversations. The shrill call of a herring gull right above her, frighteningly close. A scratching sound, then silence again. Now and then she could hear her captor moving about, swearing or mumbling. Then again the gull's call, only a few yards above her, eerily pierced the quiet, echoing hollow. She must be somewhere out on the marshes, she decided again and her heart lifted slightly. Yes, that was it, on the marshes. But then it sank again. There was nowhere and nothing 'on the marshes'.

She must have fallen asleep. How long she had slept, she had no idea. Her captor was asleep, she could hear him snoring. Lizzie whispered a prayer, as fear silently crept back into her subconscious. Determinedly, she began to struggle, rubbing her head up and down, until at last the poorly tied blindfold fell away. She was lying on her side, blinking in the dim light and staring directly into the beady eyes of a hideous gargoyle. She screamed and shook her head, trying to focus and get back and as far away as her ties would allow at the same time. There were ribs all about and above her. A great chapel roof of ribs. The sea serpent? Was she really inside the sea serpent?



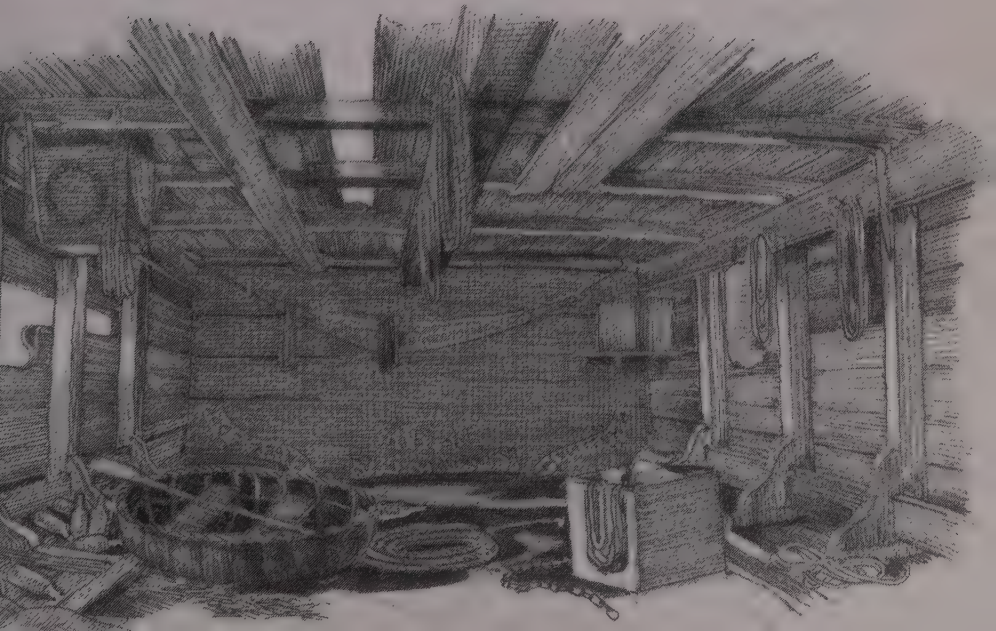
## CHAPTER 19

# Lizzie's Prison

Lizzie calmed down as quickly as she had panicked. As her eyes focused in her twilight world she realised it was a hermit crab, just a few inches from her face. The comical creature was probably as surprised as Lizzie herself and shuffled off sideways out of sight. Lizzie's trembling stopped her voice from gasping: "Stop, don't go..." But it was too late, even if the creature had understood her words.

As she turned, her nose hit a crust of bread, suspended above her. Next to it, the neck of a leather flask dangled, also within reach of her mouth. If she raised her head a little, she could eat and drink. It gave her a shock, but she also realised that Sam Smagge needed her alive for whatever his plans were. Why hadn't he heard her scream? *Is he gone?*

She looked about her with some trepidation. The space she was in was a curious shape, its ceiling like that of a village chapel. The ribs of...? No.





They weren't ribs curving above her. They were wooden beams covered with planks. She relaxed. But there was no chapel and no house on the marshes, only abandoned wrecks. The realisation came quite suddenly. That was where she was – she was in a ship or a barge, not a floating ship, but a scuppered one. This was not the first time she had seen a wreck, but she had never viewed one from the inside and upside-down.

Barnacles covered the sides to well above her. It must have been here for quite a while then. All around and higher-up there were ropes, lots of ropes, hanging from hooks on the arched walls and piled in coils on the floor surface. There were other signs of habitation. Piles of clothes or bedding. Bundles hanging from hooks and packets and casks, all secured in the highest part of the keel.

She was in a wreck out on a marsh, in a semi-dark topsy-turvy world. What little light there was filtered through at the broken rear of the hull. There was a coracle, a small boat covered with cow hide, pulled in out of sight through the open rear of the hull – probably her abductor's means of transport.

The reason for her not being able to move was the solid stake, driven into the mud below, to which she was tied. As much as she pulled and twisted, her bonds would not budge. And the more she pulled, the tighter they became.

Her captor came rushing over, shaking the floor on which she lay. Planks that were poorly secured. She felt the old rugs and sailcloth give way slightly, as if the planks rested on something, broom or some sort of branches or reeds. She had recognised the sound of rattling spurs before, and now they stood beside her, they were part of the boots that looked just like the pair her father had lost.

"You horrid child. Knew you couldn't be trusted," her abductor screamed at her.

"It just came off," cried Lizzie, shaking her head. Sam Smagge was bearded and dishevelled, dirty and matted with mud. Then she saw his arm, stuck in a bandage that was equally caked and dirty.

"Ah, well, can't be helped," he said, a little calmer. "Can you write?"

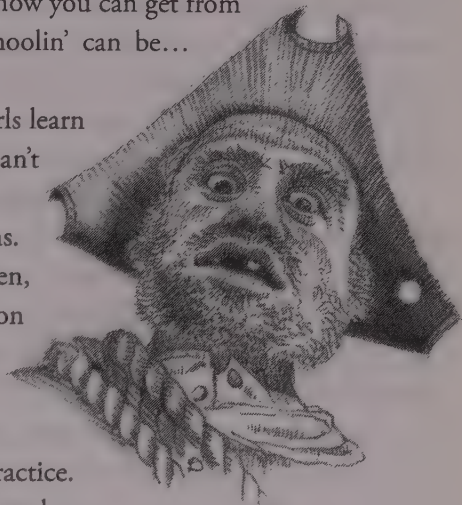


"Of course I can write," answered Lizzie proudly. "I go to school."

"What, by Jimminy, would a girl, want with learnin' is what I always say. All you girls need to know you can get from your ma'. Besides, girls with schoolin' can be... dangerous."

"Nonsense! Why shouldn't girls learn also? Did you not go to school? Can't you write?"

He ignored her questions. "Need you to write a note!" Then, when he saw the defiant look on her face, he added: "...a note to your father, curse him!" He held a slate in his hand, like the slates they used in school for writing practice. They could be wiped easily and used over and over. She did not question how he came by it.



"If I loosen your hands," he said, "will you write as I say an' behave yourself?"

"I always behave myself."

"You know what I mean. Here!" he said, freeing her hands again and pressing the slate towards her. The slate fell away. Her hands were too stiff. She tried to rub life back into them.

"Don't show off. It's not so bad, you spoiled child."

Then he added something that made Lizzie realise it had been Sam Smagge hiding up by the bells in the church tower when she'd been locked in by his nephews. "There are no bells to ring this time," he growled. The Smagge boys must have known their uncle was up there!

Lizzie took her time and ignored him. "I can't write with my fingers so cold." She picked up a part of the slate again. "And it's too dark."

The dim light that filtered through, reflecting off water at the broken part of the hull, gave her an excuse to complain. The coracle that plugged the opening like a badly fitting cork cut out more light. Grumbling,



Smagge fetched and lit a storm lantern and secured it above her. A small pool of light surrounded them.

"Just write!" A smaller slate shard was offered to her: "Here, this will have to do."

"What shall I write?"

"You write: 'Leave them 'Owlers' alone. I'm fine. Lizzie.' Yeah, leave them 'Owlers' alone. That will do for now."

"He'll ignore that," said Lizzie against her better judgement. She knew that whatever happened, her father would do what was best.

'Dear father,' Lizzie started to write.

"An' don't write what I didn't say. I can read."

Lizzie realised he really could read. She had to send her father a message somehow. As she wrote, her hands were shaking more than necessary. A few times she had to wipe out a letter with her finger and rewrite it. It showed, but not enough for Sam to notice. 'I'm fine. Lizzie.'

"I'm not fine," she said, as she handed back the tablet. "I don't like lying."

Sam pressed two tablet pieces together to protect the writing, then wrapped them in a cloth. It was not easy with only one hand. "That's good. He'll know your writin', I hope." His left arm was bandaged crudely in dirty linen for protection.

Lizzie's hands were to be tied again. To drag out the moment she said, as friendly as she could: "That must hurt. I could bandage it for you, properly."

"You won't get around me that easily." His tone was not as fierce as before.

"I've seen Aunt Hilda do it many times." Lizzie felt encouraged.

Sam thought a moment, then he said: "Can't be worse than my own." A pistol appeared in his right hand, which he placed down well out of Lizzie's reach. "That's just in case you gets ideas."

"I like helping, honestly," said Lizzie.

The dirty bandages on his left arm were being pushed towards her. Lizzie had to fight off nausea as she tried to undo the reeking cloths.



"It's healing well. Here, just pull it off," Smagge said, kneeling by his victim and gritting his teeth. With his right hand he pulled the bandages right off. He winced. So did Lizzie. The stump, where the hand had been, had been sewn together well. Expertly, as if by a surgeon. And indeed, although it still looked red and angry, it was healing. Sam pushed a tub of ointment and somewhat cleaner bandages towards Lizzie. She was surprised and wondered where they came from. Had they come from the break-in at the village apothecary? She knew well enough not to ask.

Lizzie used her remembered skills as best she could. Sam seemed pleased. He covered her work again with another rag, which he then managed to knot about his neck as a sling, using his teeth and his only hand.

Lizzie was astonished at the way he managed to do that with only one hand. She decided it had to be a skill he'd learnt as a sailor.

Now she tried another idea. "If my father does not go after the smugglers, the government will send someone else in his stead."

"That they may. But I'll be long gone by then." Her hands were tied again anyway.

*What did he mean?*

Time passed. Had she slept again? Was all this just some strange dream from which she would awaken any moment?

Lizzie shivered from the cold. She did not know how long she had slept, or what day it was. It would soon be November. Winter must be approaching fast.

Images of her mother flashed through her mind. She remembered how secure she had felt when her mother had been alive. She must be strong. *Mother, what would you do?* she asked. *Mother, protect me.* She prayed. Her mother would watch over her. When she had visited the Gypsies, the old Romany woman had said so. She remembered their conversation and shivered at the memory of the woman's accurate premonition.

"What, what do you see?" Lizzie had asked the wise woman. "Tell me, please, what do you see? Is it my mother?"

"Your mother loves you very much and is proud of you. No, it's fine,



you will be very happy.”

“But why can’t you tell me? Please, what did you see?”

“I can see the underside of a boat, quite a large boat, but you are not in the water.”

Outside the small pool of light from the storm lantern it was dark. All was quiet. Lizzie listened. Was she alone? She tried to make conversation. There was no answer. But she did hear something. She heard the water lapping. Only slight gurgling sounds, but they were all about her and under her, gentle splashes as if moving water was hitting solid objects, rippling, then receding. Like a murmur, but it sounded different – closer. She heard an owl hoot in the distance. The dawn chorus? Lizzie wondered. She had lost all sense of time.

Then she realised the splashing sounds were getting ever so slightly louder and nearer. The tide was coming in.





# Dangerous Accusations

**I**n the village, rumours and speculations were going round. People whispered, nodded, made assumptions and accusations. Black Shuck howling at the castle ruins. A child disappearing. Sweaty horses in stables. Break-ins. And now the Morgans' milk cow had gone dry. Mrs Morgan remembered how Lizzie's Aunt Hilda had looked at the cow in passing. To her it seemed obvious:

"Lizzie's aunt knows about herbs. She was good with animals, even cured them sometimes. How could she do that without the devil's help? And wasn't her niece, who had so blatantly taken off with an imp or maybe the devil himself, always in the company of animals? A young deer? Who'd ever heard of a deer following a human about? Hadn't she bewitched the Sheriff so he would hand her the poor creature? And who ever heard of a girl getting schooling? To be cleverer than the rest of the woman in the village? And an owl that couldn't fly, now could fly again. Were they her imps? Her familiars? Wasn't it well known that suspicious people gathered the devil's messengers about them and that imps were sent out by witches to harm others?"

Then another suspicious thing happened. On a nearby farm a calf was born lame. Lizzie's deer had been seen feeding on the lane to the farm and the owl had flown over it. Wasn't that proof of her involvement? And who had been teaching the child? Her father was away so often, her aunt would have taught her.

Villagers were always superstitious, not wanting to tempt fate and to avoid bad things from happening. If they had some reason to be unhappy or jealous about something, they tried to find a scapegoat. There seemed to be no explanation for some events, so they were looking for someone



to blame. Once they thought about it – and Mrs Morgan made sure they did – they'd all seen Hilda Chaundeler nearby, or one of her familiars had been, at places that had experienced some mishap, however long ago such involvement might have been. Even people she had helped with her healing knowledge now wondered just how she had acquired her wisdom. And Mrs Morgan kept spreading her stories and accusations at every opportunity.

The final suspicious incident occurred when the Morgans' son, Isaac, climbed up and fell off a tree, hurting himself badly and the Morgans had to pay for expensive treatment and medicine by the apothecary. That had to be directly caused by Hilda Chaundeler because of the way the boy had spoken up when he had seen Lizzie taking off with the fiery imp in the woods. In his mother's eyes, Isaac Morgan became a hero who had stood up to a witch.

What Mrs Morgan omitted to say was that since Inspector Masters had been on the scene her husband's income from smuggling – and that of several others in the village – had been considerably reduced and earning their 'living' had been made much more difficult.

The Reverend announced afternoon prayers for the safe return of the child Lizzie Masters, who almost everyone had previously loved and admired and who had never hurt anyone, but some stayed away. They were not fooled by her Christian piousness and good manners. They knew better, that she really was a witch like her aunt!



## “Just make for Brimstone Saltings!”

Captain Rattler Morgan was the last to leave the oyster dredger. It had been a profitable trip with all the bad weather, all the way to Holland and back, with a stopover at Calais for good measure. Most of the cargo had been divided between a variety of hiding places. Some had even been delivered to customers and some to agents who could be guaranteed to deliver and pay. A certain code of trust existed between the smugglers. Without such co-operation they would not be able to stay in business for long.

Morgan was pleased with himself. An oyster dredger that simply had strayed a little too far out of English waters hardly looked suspicious. Sometimes they actually went out dredging. It kept them legitimate and the law out of their business. Smugglers' boats might be impounded or broken up. But who would suspect an innocent hard-working oyster dredger?

He had taken down the storm lantern and was about to leave his ship, when the hooded figure of a monk stepped in his path. “Whoa, not so fast, Captain. I’ve got business with yourn.”

Captain Morgan raised the lantern, but all he could see was that curious figure of the monk. The face, cast downward, remained shaded. The Captain took a step back, but the figure followed. “What do you want? This be my ship. I charge you to leave prresently, or else!”

Something seemed familiar about the disguised figure in front of him. And yet... He stepped backwards another few steps, sure-footed in his own domain. The figure followed closely. “Is this what yourn looking for?” he asked. With that the monk’s cloak opened and a cudgel, large and heavy, was raised above the Captain’s head.



Morgan recognised the instrument, which he kept handy for just such occasions. His mouth remained open for some moments in surprise.

"I know your boat as well as you, but my need is greater," spat the figure.

"A monk? I never saw no monk on my ship afore," Morgan bluffed.

"You know me enough. An' being here, you also knows I means business. You see, I don't exist, but I'm back. An' that means one more murder won't make a difference in hell."

The captain remained silent, wondering what to make of the unwelcome visitor.

"Thinkin' of your family, Rattler, an' what I could do if you cross me?" the hooded figure crowed, knowing he had the upper hand. "Now, let's talk, man to man!"

"What do you want, Sam? Heard you were some other part of the world at least. Or maybe dead. There have been rumours."

"You owe me. An' keep the rumours coming. I don't exist. Beyond the law, if you get me drift. I could have killed you, no bother. But I've decided I needs you. An' your ship. An' the others. You'll be my business partner. You be all right. There's profit in being invisible. Profit for all."

"Masters will soon get wind of things."

"He won't. He's being dealt with. I don't bungle things like you did."

Rattler Morgan winced at the memory of the two men he had sent out to teach the Inspector a lesson via his daughter. Then his unwelcome visitor added: "I'm not being chased off by a girl and an owl. Want to give that *Hoy* publican something to smirk about, rattling everyone..."

"How do you know that, what he said, I mean?"

"When you've been through the gate of death, you tend to know things others don't," Sam said grandly, wishing to impress his reluctant new 'partner' with some supernatural knowledge. "Your trip to Flushing was successful?"

*Damn, how did he know that?* thought Rattler.

Sam had made no threatening move and the cudgel had been lowered,



yet Morgan was still unnerved at how Smagge knew about something they had discussed among themselves at the *Hoy* only a few nights ago.

"I'm expected at home." Morgan made one more attempt.

"You've been out d-r-r-r-e-d-g-i-n-g." Sam emphasised the word to imply he knew the truth of their journey. "Be that as it may, they will be used to your hours."

There was a knife now in Sam Smagge's hand. "Think of the extra profits. It's a good deal. We'll work together again. 'Rattler and the ghost'. The sooner started. Set sail this minute!"

Rattler Morgan felt the cold blade tickle his ribs. He had no choice. "You know I can't handle this boat on my own. You'd have to help."

"So you can jump me at the first opportunity? No deal. You's had to manage afore..."

At that moment a voice called out from the moorings below: "Hullo, Captain, glad you're still here."

Footsteps could be heard on the gangplank before Morgan could answer. But he did anyway.

"Just coming. Stay down below!" Sam's blade penetrated the Captain's skin. He understood and fell silent. Sam had ducked behind him and into his shadow. Instantly Haggar Greenaway walked into the light of the lantern.

Haggar stopped to catch his breath and then said in a low voice: "The Reverand's cask of brandy. I clean forgot about the Reverand..."

"It'll keep," Morgan insisted. "The hour is late," then he rose a few inches as the knife dug deeper and he changed his mind: "Though as you be here, there is some new business to be taken care of. Throw off the ropes, we'll sail out again."

"Oh, I didn't figure..."

"Just do me a favour – just do it. Please!" The 'Please' sounded more like a command and Haggar, being glad of a place in Morgan's crew, did as he was told. Once they were out of earshot of land, Smagge, still hooded, made his appearance.

"You should have stayed abed, young Haggar."



The surprised fisherman who was securing a sail to the mizzenmast, almost fell overboard. Sam had to stretch out his good arm to ensure the fellow kept his balance. With that, Haggar had seen his face in the dim light of the lantern. He was speechless and rooted to the spot.

"Did not come aboard to stop you drowning," said Sam casually. "Get on and do your job."

Haggar did not move.

Rattler Morgan stepped up to him and Sam stood back, to a safe distance. "It's a'right, Haggar," said the Captain, "I was as puzzled as you'n. It's no ghost. It's Sam Smagge a'right, back and up to join up again. You better not mention you seen him."

"To anyone!" hissed Sam from between clenched teeth. "I do not exist and that ought to be good for bus'ness."

"Where now? Where are we making for?" asked Morgan at last, wondering what the night-time journey was in aid of. He had decided to go along with the fugitive from the law for now. It was safer.

"Brimstone Saltings!" came the curt answer. "Just make for Brimstone Saltings!"

"That's Grrrregory Gang territory, Brrrimstone Saltings, what business?" Rattler Morgan objected.

Instantly, he was looking down the barrel of Sam Smagge's pistol. "How many times? Let me do the thinkin'!" urged Sam.

They sailed for some time silently, each in his own world and with his own troubles. At Brimstone Saltings, Sam ordered Rattler Morgan to pick up some well-protected bundles from the water in a rotting hull to which they had been tied. Then it was off to Twitty Fee, where they had to lay up near a derelict barn. Sam stayed aboard as Morgan and Greenaway waded across on that foul night, to collect a haul of smuggled merchandise from under bales of hay.

"The Gregories won't take this lying down," assured Rattler Morgan once he'd returned, expecting trouble.

"Let me worry about the Gregories. They'll get over it. I need money quickly to start a new life well away from here. Later you can blame it

all on me and claim innocence. If you're so worried, you can always give 'em your share."

Sam 'Sealegs' Smagge seemed to have everything thought out, every detail planned.



## A Message! From Lizzie?

Lizzie's father sat near the look-out on the high ground, on the very tree trunk where Aunt Hilda had last seen Lizzie. He had tried everything, searched everywhere he could think of, but they had not found the slightest clue as to what had happened to his daughter. He needed to think and he hoped that being in the last place she had been seen would inspire him. He'd sat there for hours, having had to let his men go. They were too tired. The dampness of the weather reflected the heaviness of his heart.

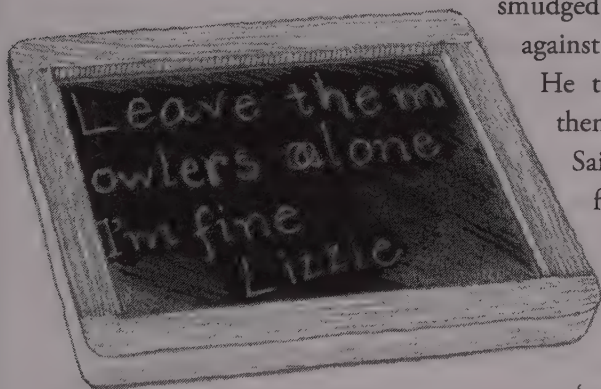
There had been an important development, though. A message, obviously from the kidnapper, had been brought by a small boy to Aunt Hilda's house. The boy had been given a farthing by a monk-like figure to deliver it. It had contained slate tablets with a message written by Lizzie: 'Leave them Owlers alone. I'm fine. Lizzie.' A curious message, obviously dictated to her.

It was not quite the ransom note he had been expecting. It seemed, the kidnapper's demand was for him to give up his job. He would have to stand down. That would be a long ordeal for Lizzie, if she was ever returned, but a price the Inspector was prepared to pay. How could he return an answer? Standing down officially would take at least another day and that would be too long for Lizzie to remain missing. She must have been very frightened when she wrote the note. Several of the letters had been wiped and written twice. That was not like Lizzie.

Her father had also heard the rumours of Sam Smagge's disappearance from London, but until now he had dismissed them as the usual idle village gossip. What if there was truth in it? It might be just the sort of thing a desperate man might stoop to. On the whole, the smuggling

community accepted the Revenue Service as just another problem to be dealt with, preferably by avoiding it, not one to pursue families. But where could the dangerous Sam Smagge be found, if it was he? A pity Lizzie had not been able to include some hint to her whereabouts. A tear trickled down the tired man's cheek that could not be disguised even by the drizzle that dampened the air.

The short message was imprinted on his memory. He only had to close his eyes and he could read it: 'Leave them Owlers alone. I'm fine. Lizzie.' He went over and over it in his mind, even remembering the smudged letters that stood out against the rest – h-m-r-s-a.



He tried to make sense of them. 'His Majesty's Royal Sailors' Army?' Lizzie's father knew of no such company. Eventually, by jumbling and unjumbling the letters he made out the word: 'm-a-r-s-h'. Marsh! Why

hadn't he seen that earlier? Lizzie had sent him a message. There was even a 's-a-m' in there.

The sound of the noonday bell could be heard from somewhere, a great distance away. A twig broke behind him. In spite of his tiredness he swung around, pistol at the ready.

There, looking alarmed but trying to smile, stood a boy. The Inspector recognised him almost instantly. Lizzie had defended him from Sam Smagge's cowardly accusation. Stefan 'the silent boy', she had called him.

"You startled me," said the Inspector, putting away his pistol. "Is there another message?"

The boy shook his head, then suddenly dropped to the floor on all fours. The Inspector looked puzzled at the boy's comical gestures when he



began to walk – like a deer? Or a donkey? Then he stood up and flapped one arm like a bird while holding the other stiff by his side.

“The owl. Lizzie’s animals. Lizzie?” Lizzie’s father tried his best to interpret the Gypsy boy’s language.

The boy grinned and nodded his head quickly. He pointed in a direction that was difficult to understand. There was nothing there, only marshland.

“Marshes? Marsh!” The Inspector was suddenly wide-awake. “Do you know where Lizzie is?” Lizzie had told of her visit to the Gypsy camp and now her father believed the boy wanted to help.

Stefan nodded forcefully at the word ‘marsh’, then disappeared again, only to reappear moments later with a Gypsy pony, indicating to the Inspector to follow him.

The Inspector’s horse was tied up nearby. As he could not think of anything better, he mounted up and followed the Gypsy boy. The boy and his pony had no problem finding the way. The Inspector’s horse simply followed, though it was difficult to keep up, first in woodland, then heath and finally down to the low land and towards a marsh and with it a memory the Inspector wished to forget.

He’d lost his fine boots out there somewhere, in the pursuit of cross-eyed Jack, that villain who had been found murdered and floating barefoot in the river.

Could this vast expanse of nothing but salt marsh and briny be where Lizzie had been taken? He had no choice but to follow the boy, who made for a small inlet where a few low small boats were kept by wildfowlers, hidden in shrubs.

Stefan jumped off his pony and motioned towards the boats. “Is this where you want us to start rowing?” asked the Inspector, dismounting and peering into the drizzle. “Ah, well, I don’t suppose the poachers will have any objection if we borrow one of their boats.”

Lizzie’s father could not think why he trusted this Gypsy boy, who could be leading him into a trap. But Lizzie had trusted him and that was enough. He could barely hold the oars, he was that tired, but nevertheless



he started rowing. Luckily the tide was in and at first they made good progress. Even so, he seemed to be rowing forever, having lost his bearing under the cloudy sky. He noticed that without making a fuss, the boy was pointing the way, making decisions as to which rill to follow, and where the water was deep enough.

When he slowed down, Stefan tapped on his shoulder and indicated it was his turn to row. Lizzie's father objected at first, but resigned himself to nature and handed over the oars. The boy was not used to such work and found it difficult at first. But at least they were making progress again.

The Inspector had slumped where he sat, unable to resist a few moments sleep, but he awoke instantly when he felt the rowing stop. Looking up, he was astonished to have arrived beside the upturned hull of a small barge, a hoy, desolate and deserted. He looked at Stefan, his face puzzled and questioning. Stefan made his owl impression.

"Lizzie?" her father whispered, as if he could not believe his eyes. "Lizzie is here?"

Stefan nodded urgently, pointing at the wreck.

The Inspector stood up in the small boat and drew his gun from his belt: "Come out, whoever you are. Is it you, Sam Smagge?" he shouted loud and stern. There was no answer. "You are surrounded," he lied, "come out now or we'll come in!"

"Father?" The small voice from inside the wreck rallied him with a start. "Father, is that you?"

"Lizzie?" The Inspector's voice sounded hoarse with emotion as it came from his throat. "Yes, Lizzie. Yes. Are you all right?"

"I am not dreaming again, am I?"

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, Father, I think so."

"Stefan, the Gypsy boy, brought me. He's here with me. We'll have you out in a minute. Keep calm." Then he repeated her name: "Lizzie...!"

Her father was searching for a way into the hull. His fists thumped on it. It seemed solid and tough. When they came to the rear of the wreck,



where the rudder had broken away, the damaged woodwork might be the way in, but the tide was still too high to simply paddle inside. As Lizzie's father tried to loosen planks, Stefan slipped overboard and into the water, diving through the broken space under the hull.

"Wait, I'll help," called her father, but he could not fasten the boat and they must not lose it. "Stefan is coming," he shouted. "Don't worry..."

To her father it seemed like ages: "Is she all right? Is she alone?" he asked, forgetting the boy would not have been able to answer had he wanted to. He was about to enter the water himself, when Lizzie called out: "Stefan, however did you...? Father, it's Stefan," she called out, stating the obvious in her joy.

It only took moments for Stefan to free her.

"Stefan?" Lizzie said, almost as in disbelief.

He had to lower her into the water to get her out and to the boat, where her father was eagerly waiting to lift her out of the freezing brine.

Stefan climbed up over the rim and splashed into the boat behind her, breathless. Luckily, she had been alone.

"Father?" She threw her arms about him, "Oh, Father, I was so lonely."

"You're alive?" exclaimed her father. "Thank God, Lizzie, you're all right." She nodded and tried to smile. He took off his greatcoat and wrapped it around the shivering girl. "That'll keep you warm until we get you home."

"My feet," she cried, "my feet are still tied."

"Oh, dear." He undid the greatcoat again. Stefan was already untying her ropes, so her father rubbed her hands and then her feet to bring some warmth back, before he wrapped the large coat back around her and cradled her, trying to warm her, like a baby. Her teeth chattered and her whole body was shaking. Then he noticed Stefan was replacing the jerkin he had thrown off before slipping into the water. The poor boy was dripping wet too, but he quite simply picked up the oars and started rowing again.

Lizzie's father was in a dilemma. "No, let me, Stefan," he said without



putting Lizzie down. The boy shook his head.

Her father changed his mind: "All right, for a little while, then. It'll warm you up at least. Thank you, Stefan, we're in your debt. How did you know?" He bit his lip. How could the boy tell him?

"It'll keep." He turned to Lizzie: "Thank God we've got you back."

"I can't believe it, are you really here?" whispered Lizzie. "I hope this isn't another dream. I thought I was going to drown when the tide came in. But the floor floated up with the water. I knew you would come for me. I told him so."

"Who? Who did you tell?"

"Sam Smagge. He is no ghost. He's lost a hand. I wrote a message. He made me write. Where are we?"

"We're at Brimstone Saltings. I didn't know which marsh? Until Stefan here..."

"Oh, thank you, Stefan. I'm glad you believed him. Not everyone would."

They moved quietly over the water for a while, twisting and turning the small boat, just full of emotion and gratitude. Finally, Stefan seemed to falter on the oars.

"Let me row for a while. You'll have to show me the way, though," Lizzie's father said to Stefan, laying Lizzie down, curled up in the bottom of the boat.

When they finally made it back to solid land where their horses waited, the Inspector placed his daughter side-saddle in front of him, so he could hold her between his arms and the reins of his horse. Stefan smiled and swung back onto his pony to follow them.

It was still drizzling, but they made good headway on finding the road that would take them back to the village. As her strength returned, Lizzie thought she ought to ride properly, but she did not want to make a fuss.

"We must thank Stefan, Father," she said, as they rode along.

"You just get well. We will think of something." Her father held her a little closer.



Something was wrong. Lizzie felt it in her heart and she turned her head back to Stefan.

"Thank you, Stefan." She was trying to smile at the resourceful boy, but the path behind them was empty. "Stefan!" she cried with some alarm, turning to her father: "Stefan's gone. He's gone."

It was the alarm in her voice rather than what she said that made her father look back. She was right. They were alone. A smile played over her father's face.

"He'll have taken a short-cut back to his family. There's no more he could do. Stefan knows his way about. We'll find him again when he wants to be found."



# “Swim the Witch!”

By the time they reached the village night was beginning to fall. There was a commotion in the open space close by the churchyard just as the pair rode in. For a few moments they thought that people had come out to welcome them, but how could they have known? Moments later Lizzie and her father were surrounded by an angry looking crowd, swinging sticks and waving pitchforks.

“Look, there’s the Inspector’s little darling,” shouted one of the Smagge boys, the moment he got sight of Lizzie, “let’s swim her as well!”

“Yes let’s,” called his brother. “She’s the cause of all this.”

“Oh, there she is,” whined Mrs Morgan, “The little witch is back just in time. What a coincidence.” She was screaming and crying and laughing, all at the same time. “Come to rescue her mistress no doubt.”

People gathered about the horse in such an agitated way, it reared up, kicking at the air with its front hooves. The people moved back, but her father lost his balance and tumbled off his horse, taking Lizzie with him, but still trying to protect her. Several stout bodies immediately fell on him, holding him down and tying his legs and hands. Try as he might, he could not shake them off.

“The Government Man. We’ve got the Government Man.” Wild laughter accompanied the shouts.

“Now let’s see him struggle!”

“Tie him down. He’ll want to see this.”

“No, let’s put him in the stocks.”

Lizzie threw herself over her father, scratching and kicking at the rough hands of his tormentors, but she was weak and thrown aside like a rag doll. Again, she tried, but she could not reach him. Bewildered and crying, she crawled away from the mob.

“What is happening?” she asked the nearest person, while trying to



find her aunt and uncle. Her aunt would know what to do.

"It's the witch," someone said, "she knows where the girl is. But she won't tell. So they're taking her to be swum. And that owl man as well. Then they'll talk."

Lizzie didn't understand: "But I am here. My aunt didn't know where I was. I was kidnapped."

"Oh, it's too late for excuses," said an old man, wringing his hands. "They've made up their mind. Too much has happened."

"What? What has happened?" asked Lizzie again, not knowing what to make of all this confusion. She just could not understand what had happened to her village and some of the people in it. It was as if they had closed their minds to reason.

"Oh, you don't know about the signs? The Morgans' cow gone dry? And the weird calf? And the illness? Where have you been?" shouted another.

"I told you, I've been kidnapped..." She couldn't finish her words as she was pushed along with the crowd. The people were excited and unwilling to listen. They did not seem to recognise her. She certainly did not recognise the behaviour of some of them, though she had known them all her life. How had they become so wild and unthinking? Some had obviously been drinking too much beer and gin, which added to their strange behaviour.

"Swim the witch!"

"Swim the witch!"

The shouts got wilder with excitement.

"Let's see if her animal familiars will save her?"

"Perhaps the devil will come and rescue her?"

"Ooh, not him? Think he might?"

"I want to see this..."

They all pushed down towards Church Creek, which reached like a dark crescent around the ancient church on its raised churchyard. Barges and smaller hoys were lying at anchor in the muddy water. One had a yardarm, used for loading and unloading goods, swinging from a mast

with a rope dangling.

In the gathering dusk, people were coming out of their houses by the church, carrying lanterns, and out of the ale houses to find out what the commotion was all about. People looked on, but did nothing to help. Lizzie turned to a woman holding on to her children, and begged for help.

"Oooh, not me," said the woman, "they're liable to accuse me, too, when they're in this mood. It's best not to get involved. Don't you go too near."

Narrow gaps between the houses squeezed up against the churchyard wall allowed glimpses of the church where light was streaming from the colourful windows. Communal voices could be heard, or would have been heard, had they not been drowned out by the noise of the excited crowd.

They passed the smithy and the inn with its stables. The Smagge boys had found Lizzie again and danced around her now.

"Let's put her in the creek as well! Let's swim her, too!"

They grabbed hold of her and pushed forward, hurting her. As she reached the front of the crowd Lizzie saw Uncle Jonah, who was stumbling and looking frightened, trying to escape the crowd too. Her aunt was now in the middle of a huddle of people who were pushing and shoving her roughly towards and into the water, on the hard quay where wood faggots and timber and oyster baskets were piled up. Her aunt's hands were tied, and a small group were pushing her towards the barge with the swinging yardarm. Swaying ships' lanterns threw an eerie light on the scene. There was a large wicker basket attached to the end of the rope and someone on the barge pushed it towards them.

"Now we'll see who's a witch." Mrs Morgan wailed. "Now we'll see if the devil will save her."

Rough hands lifted Aunt Hilda into the wicker basket. Then some people on the barge pulled on the rope, lifting the basket containing Aunt Hilda and swinging it out over the deeper side of the creek. Lizzie looked out for Uncle Jonah who was held close by and made to watch, but unable to help, just like her. She struggled, but her feet wanted to



give way, so she was supported by her arms to watch.

"Don't worry! Your time will come!" screamed the Smagge boys. The people really had lost their reason, acting as a mob, watching and waiting, both excited and egging each other on but also afraid in case something might happen to them, too.

Aunt Hilda was lowered down to the deep creek.

"Is it deep enough? Is the tide in?" A voice came from the back of the crowd.

"Think she'll swim?" Someone voiced the question aloud that everyone was thinking. "Or will the devil let her drown?"

"But then she'd be innocent." Someone seemed to regain their reasoning, but that voice was drowned out by the shouts. Aunt Hilda would be declared innocent if she drowned, but guilty if she floated. It was crazy.

Horses in the nearby stables began to whinny and strain against their chains, bucking and snorting in fear. Something was worrying them. Iron shod hooves thumped against their wooden enclosures, splintering wood. The usually docile animals seemed to want to break free. No one bothered. The sounds became a background to the noise of the excited crowd. But it grew louder as did the cries from the horses.

Suddenly everyone stopped still. There was an audible intake of breath and the voices fell silent. People in the second group stumbled into one another, as the first ones pushed back. In a long moment of confusion people tripped and fell in a backward rush. Music could be heard in the silence, coming from the small harmonium in the church.

They had all been so busy in condemning Aunt Hilda, in their blind excitement no one had noticed the movement in the shadows among the churchyard trees and the headstones and then down among the woodpiles and sheds of the wood yard and the stables. Now they hopped and slithered into the lights of lanterns and torches that glistened on their backs and sent a horror through the crowd. As if on cue, the clouds parted and at that very moment the full moon threw a cold light over the scene.



There were screams: "The devil is here!"

"What?"

"No, it's the... the... gargoyles?"

"The gargoyles are down!"

"Gargoyles? Where?"

"They've come to fetch the witch! They've come to fetch the witch!"

"What gargoyles?"

"Wh...? Arghhhhh..."

The cries rose up and stifled in many throats. People stumbled and tripped as they tried to flee from the slaving, lurking, sliding, crouching, hopping, slobbering creatures that were ready to pounce.

Those on the edge of the creek were trapped with nowhere to go except down into the water. Safest were those on the barge and the rope – for the moment at least. But as the moon shone brighter, the shock of the gargoyles, whose reflections they could see in the water, made them let go of the rope. Aunt Hilda cried out as she hit the water in her wicker basket.

No one cared; they were all in danger now.

Someone tried to run away from the water's edge, but the wart-covered goat creature with the curved horn on its nose made one giant leap on its deformed hind legs and cut off his escape. The slime-slobbering hound breathed in short rasping bursts like someone out of breath, trailing saliva. The two-headed, double-grinning monkey drooled and dribbled, jumping up and down as excited as some of the people had been moments earlier. The claw-winged, scaly dragon flapped its bat-like wings and tried to look taller than he was. A hunchbacked creature with a pig's snout and flippers crawled along, trying to keep up with the others.

They were like no beasts known to man. They ducked a little, cringing in the light of the moon, but all had their horrible salivating mouths wide open.

Now it was the rabble of people who were being threatened. It was they who were petrified, not by other villagers, but by the ghastly creatures that looked down at them every day from the church roof. Some had



only recently been put back following the repairs on the church and the tower, but here they were alive, between the two groups of people, sliding and circling the dark water, no longer stone, but...

"It's All Hallows' Eve already," Lizzie realised, her own ordeal almost forgotten. "How long have I been away?"

The Smagge boys had let go of her at the surprise appearance of the gargoyles and Lizzie took her chance, turning and stumbling as fast as her legs would allow, back up the road, up to the churchyard. Once again she knocked on the church door and with her last ounce of strength she lifted the heavy door ring of Sanctuary. Behind her she could hear screams of terror.





# A Rude Awakening

**I**t all happened so fast, the Smagge boys had not even missed Lizzie when they were rudely thrust aside by the hysterical crowd. Lizzie's father pushed through the rabble with all the fury he could muster. He was immediately followed by what seemed to be demons in long flowing garments, rushing past them, straight towards the ghastly creatures. They stepped on those that were in their way, not realising in their hurry just what they were stepping on. The gargoyles reared up wildly, but no sound came from the mouths that ought to be stone.

Lizzie's father stopped for a moment, trying to find Aunt Hilda. He saw Uncle Jonah who beckoned towards the deep water where the tidal creek had closed over his wife in the basket just moments earlier. Kettlewell Waude rushed past and dived into the dark creek, instantly followed by the Inspector. At the same time, two of his men ran up the gangplank to the barge where they swung back the yardarm, but it was too late, the rope had followed the basket into the creek. The swinging yardarm, however, caught Mrs Morgan and the others on the deck by surprise and as it swung around, Aunt Hilda's tormentors were pushed off the barge, mercifully on the shallower side of the creek. They were tossed head first into the soft muddy water, but scrambled up again, spitting and wiping their eyes only to stare straight into the snouts and fangs and beaks of the snarling gargoyles.

Luckily, Aunt Hilda had only spent a very short time under the water and the sudden release of the rope had trapped air in her voluminous undergarments, delaying her sinking. Now the Inspector and the stout Kettlewell were pulling her towards the shore, still ignorant of the gargoyles. Lizzie's father had some life-saving experience and at the edge of the water Aunt Hilda began to splutter and cough, gasping for breath in her brother's arms.



It was the Reverend Williams who answered Lizzie's knock, dressed in his embroidered vestments: "Lizzie?" he almost shouted the words with the joy of recognition. "Lizzie! Lizzie Masters! Our prayers have been answered." He took her hand and pulled her with him into the church and in front of the sparse congregation. "Thank the Lord for hearing our prayers. The child is safe." He turned to Lizzie: "Let's kneel and give thanks, then you'll have to tell us all about your deliverance!"

Lizzie was breathless, but she struggled to interrupt his flow of words: "But Reverend, sir, please, it's not me that needs saving now. There is trouble... the people... they are wild and they are going to swim my aunt and uncle in the creek, sir!"

"Lizzie?"

"Please, sir! Hurry! You must save them! I hope it's not too late."

The Reverend did not understand: "I wondered where they were..."

"Please," cried Lizzie, frantically now. "Please, sir, please come and save the people. The gargoyles..." Now she began to cry as her emotions won over. "They have taken my father, too."

"Your father? The gargoyles have taken your father?"

Lizzie shook her head in despair: "Please, sir, the people... My aunt is no witch."

The stern man looked at her and relented, shaking his head. "I don't understand."

Master Lazarus, the schoolteacher, stepped forward and spoke up: "If Lizzie says there is a problem, we better look into it," he said. "Lizzie is not prone to fancy."

The Reverend saw the worry in his eyes and he turned to the large door, his crucifix in his hand, followed by Mr Lazarus, the teacher. Lizzie followed too, and so did the people who had prayed for her.

"Lizzie!" called the Reverend with a raised voice when he stopped suddenly outside the porch. There was nothing unusual to be seen. Lizzie almost bumped into the teacher who almost bumped into the Reverend.

She rushed past both of them. "At the creek, sir. Aunt Hilda..."

The Reverend followed with some reluctance, as Lizzie led them down through the churchyard to the steps by the smithy, where people tried to push past them to get away from the creek. No one dared to stop the Reverend in his robes and Lizzie and the congregation who followed them.

Mrs Morgan was on her knees in the water, her arms lifted to shield her mud-smeared face, babbling gibberish. Next to her knelt others, also wet and covered in mud. Others just stood in the water that reached to above their knees. All had their eyes shut.

"What in God's name is the matter?" The Reverend could not believe his eyes. He knew every parishioner by name. These were not good churchgoers, on the contrary, but they were still part of his flock.

"No, not me," cried Mrs Morgan. "It's the Chaundeler women is the witch, I swear! I swear! Honest, not me...!" She screamed and rolled her eyes unseeing in the terror that gripped her. In the moonlight, the whole scene was as strange as a scene from the last judgement that had been painted above the church chancel arch.

"You've got it wrong. All wrong. We were going to bring you a sinner. A witch. Not us..."

"No! Please! I'm a good man," cried another of the people who only moments earlier had wanted to 'swim' Aunt Hilda and Uncle Jonah, hoping they would drown. How the tables were turned. People, who had been quite willing to blame an innocent neighbour for misfortunes beyond their control, now suddenly whimpered for their own lives, their eyes closed, expecting the worst.

Lizzie rushed forward to the water's edge: "Father! Aunt Hilda! You are back? You are safe? Uncle Jonah?" Uncle Jonah had joined the small group of the Inspector and his men, who were carrying Aunt Hilda from the water.

The Reverend was beginning to guess at the truth. Although the basket no longer hung from the yardarm, Aunt Hilda had obviously been in the water. So had Kettlewell and the Inspector. Two more of the Inspector's men, like Kettlewell still in their nightshirts, stood damp and shivering from cold.



But there were people standing and kneeling in the creek, their eyes shut as if some terrifying fate was about to befall them. And back up the street there were people who looked as if they had seen ghosts or some other manifestation. Something had obviously terrified them.

The Reverend turned to Lizzie and gestured towards the people in the creek: "Go and touch them," he whispered to her, "and forgive them. And make them apologise to your family."

Lizzie hesitated, but went forward when the Reverend nodded and beckoned her on. She did exactly as she had been told and touched each one of the blabbering folk. The effect was astonishing. The moment they were touched, they opened their eyes in horror and on seeing the girl instantly began accusing her.

"You! You brought this on us..."

"You and your witch aunt and your imps..."

"It's you! You were behind it all along..."

"You...?"

Then, as if awakening from some awful nightmare, they realised she was not alone. The priest with his crucifix was blessing them, with the schoolteacher and half the village looking on.

"The creatures?"

"They were here!"

"Where are the imps?"

"It was as if hell had opened up and they mistook us..."

"Oh, thank you Reverend for saving us. Thanks the Lord. The creatures! The witch sent them, sir. I'm sure she did!"

"Witch? What witch? And what imps?" asked the Reverend.

They looked about around. There were no gargoyles and if there ever had been they had now vanished. The accusers felt extremely foolish.

"You don't mean this child who came and begged me to come and help you, do you? Or do you mean her aunt and uncle who fell prey to you and your superstitions? I'm very surprised by you. And disappointed. We should leave you here to your fate. You don't deserve better."

Mrs Morgan, still looking wild and wet and dishevelled, would not



leave it there. She had been made to look ridiculous by the revenue man's sister and his spoilt child. "We saw the ungodly creatures she called to help her. We saw them with our own eyes," she insisted, wagging a shaking finger. "She brought them here."

The Reverend began to lose his patience: "Goodwife Morgan! This is the eighteenth century. We don't swim witches any more. We don't believe in gargoyle festivals. It's against the law to harbour such superstitions, let alone pursue them. It is you, who do not love your neighbour, who will be judged and by a higher authority than yours."

Aunt Hilda had recovered enough to be able to stand up again.

"We'll take her back home to rest. Lizzie too," said the Inspector. "It's been a trying time, but we're all still here. We can leave Mrs Morgan and her friends to the Constable and the law." The Inspector turned to Kettlewell Waude and his other men: "You too, get back to bed. It looks like you were down for the night when you came to help?" He smiled, holding both his sister and his daughter in his arms. His men stood close by shivering, Kettlewell especially, looking ghostly in their nightshirts.

They walked back up the road in silence and some people went back into their homes and to the inns. When they reached the church gate and the cross roads, the Reverend stopped and turned to the Inspector:

"Your daughter deserves the thanks of the whole village," he said.

The Inspector thanked the Reverend for his help. "We'll talk more in the morning."

Mrs Morgan made one more attempt to justify her actions: "The girl was in on it, I tell you. She has been led astray by her aunt. My son saw her..."

The Reverend stopped her short: "If you wanted to help, you could have joined us in prayer. Instead, the girl had to save you."

"Thank you Reverend, for saving us," said one of the people with Mrs Morgan who was still so distraught and ashen-faced, she fell on her knees, grasping at the priest's garment. "It was awful. The imps..."

The Reverend Williams took a step back and chided her for not thanking the girl and apologising to her and her father, aunt and uncle.

He did not await an answer. Turning back to the curious villagers, the priest suggested, "If you want to thank anyone, come and thank God. Let's all say thanks to an end to all this."

With that he returned to the church. In passing, he glanced up to the gargoyles, which were exactly where they had always been. Nothing seemed amiss, except perhaps for the way tonight the moonlight seemed to flicker in their sightless eyes and play about their silent mouths – leering down from their lofty perches a little more gleefully than usual? If the Reverend had not known better, he could have sworn they could have been almost alive.



# Fire on the Marsh

Once home, damp clothing was spread out on chairs to dry by the fire. There was so much to tell. There were so many questions, but they would have to wait.

"I'm going to the apothecary, just in case," said Uncle Jonah, the moment he realised where Lizzie had been held all that time, "just in case things are not all they seem."

"I'm not going to die of the marsh fever," insisted Lizzie, though her uncle took no notice. Her aunt was still in shock from her ordeal - the accusations from her fellow villagers hurt more than she had suffered in the creek.

"I'm going," decided Lizzie's father. "You three take your ease. You'll be safe here now. It won't take me long."

Some folks had followed Lizzie and her family to near the Chaundelers' home, where they stayed chatting in the lane for some time. Lizzie's father cut a comical figure in his ill-fitting clothes borrowed from Jonah. Thankfully it was too dark to notice and anyway, they turned away shamefacedly when he tried to pass.

The Inspector stopped. He wasn't going to let them off so easily: "My daughter was kidnapped and held for ransom out on the marshes," he said sternly to their backs. "She is back here with us thanks to the selfless help of another victim of false accusations, a deaf Gypsy boy. The culprit will be found and brought to justice, I can promise you that. Now you must go about your business and leave us be."

With that the moon hid again behind a cloud, and in the darkness the people turned toward their own homes.

When Thomas Barber, the apothecary, arrived at the Chaundelers' home, he shook his head in disbelief that people could still behave in such a dreadful manner to their fellow villagers. Both Lizzie and Aunt

Hilda were subjected to an examination. Lizzie's blood-flow in hands and feet was deemed normal, but she had to take the prescribed white powder called Jesuits' bark or 'quinine', a new cure for marsh fever. Aunt Hilda protested that she would be fine with her own herbs and cures, but Uncle Jonah insisted and she was made to take a powder to help her sleep.

Lizzie's father had told Mr Barber some of the story so he would know what to do. Aunt Hilda and Uncle Jonah also had their questions. They could not believe that Lizzie had just simply returned with her father and just in time. Never had there been a more important moment. Now they were doubly grateful and wrung their hands with delight. Not knowing anything about the earlier part of the day, this time it was their turn to ask.

"It was Stefan, the Gypsy boy," said Lizzie, smiling with the memory.

Her father explained what had happened: "It was he who found her." And he told the story.

Silently, Lizzie thanked her mother for giving her strength.

Her next thought was for her animals: "Are Spotty, Sooty and Stubborn all right?"

"They are all fine," said her father. "At least they ought to be, away at our cottage. They'll be safe. I'll see to your animals tomorrow. Tonight I'll stay here, just to be sure all is well again. I've just realised, I haven't had my head down for a good few nights. At last we can all take a rest. My men will deal with Sam Smagge tomorrow."

Lizzie had more questions: "The Squire, where is the Squire?"

"Oh, he is abroad on legal matters. He is an Alderman now and much in demand all over the county," said Mr Barber.

"And the Constable, shouldn't he have been here?"

"The Constable had to attend court at Chelmersford."

Lizzie turned to her father: "I wish Stefan was here, so we could thank him. He has the gift of sight, you know, the old woman said so."

"That would explain a lot," said her father. "I'm sure you'll meet again sometime when the stars are right or when either of you needs the other."



You can't blame him for leaving. He was drenched through as well, you know."

As soon as the apothecary left, Lizzie took to her cot.

Her father made himself comfortable in Uncle Jonah's fireside chair. He had another important task ahead. He had to catch a criminal and this time it was personal.

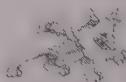
The following morning a package arrived from London. It was from the young balloonist, Mr Blanchard, who had kindly helped in the solving of the One-Tree-Hill murder. He'd sent two newspapers, one of which contained the story of a shackled convict who had jumped overboard among the tall ships in the Pool of London and presumably drowned. The other concerned a surgeon who had been found dead in his own surgery after apparently giving aid to a mystery person. Foul play was suspected.

The day was better than the night before, when the Inspector and his men set out at high tide in several boats to revisit the scene of Lizzie's imprisonment and to investigate a smuggler's hideaway. At least the rain had stopped. "Bring all the brushwood you can find," he'd said, "anything that'll burn well."

The tiny flotilla looked a little like miniature hoys laden with their flammable cargo. Very soon they could see their target in the distance, lying like a small roof atop that expanse of marsh. In daylight, navigation was less of a problem, but manoeuvring was awkward. How on earth Stefan had known to guide him so assuredly in the foul darkness of the night, the Inspector would never know.

"Be prepared," he said quietly to his men. "If Sam Smagge is here, he will be armed. And he is certainly desperate. Remember, he's murdered before. Probably more than once. Probably in London, too. Take no chances. There is damage at the stern, that's where he'll be, where the rudder is broken away."

In daylight it was obvious how the smuggler got about. A coracle had been manoeuvred into the wreck, but only partially. Or was it ready in position to leave again?





The revenue men were recruited from all over England, so they would not have local connections. They all cocked their pistols as they approached, as quietly and as alert as possible. Kettlewell Waude was in charge of the second boat.

"Keep your heads down," whispered the Inspector in a hoarse voice when he saw the coracle, "he's here."

Kettlewell had not heard or was not inclined to listen. He guided his boat as close as possible to the wreck. He was in danger, but he did not see or intend to see the Inspector's gesture to stay back.

"You in there, throw out your weapons. Come out with your hands up, or we'll fire," called out the Inspector. "You're surrounded. There is no way out."

His words echoed eerily across the wide, desolate terrain. A seagull squawked loudly and rose with annoyed flapping wings from a tussock of wild lavender nearby.

There was no answer, just the gentle splashing of water and a distant cry of a herring gull like an echo.

"I repeat," shouted the Inspector again, getting irritated, "give yourself up, Sam Smagge. We know who you are. There is no escape."

Kettlewell inched his boat closer to the wreck and the coracle. With one leap he crossed over and ducked down in the leather craft. He peered over the rim into the dark interior of the wreck. A storm lantern still lit a small part of the floor area that floated independently of the settled hull. There was an upright stake poking through the floor area under that pool of light, where it seemed some rugs or blankets had been hurriedly cast aside. Twine was still attached to the stake.

"There's nobody here." Kettlewell shouted back over his shoulder.

The Inspector had immediately moved up his boat as well and jumped over to protect his man. The coracle lifted on one end, lost its balance and turned over. As the two drenched men scrambled back on top and onto the floor-like platform inside the wreck, they made a grisly discovery. As the coracle turned upright again it supported a human arm and part of a cloak that was flung over the rim. The arm had no hand, just a dirty

bandage that was unravelling. Kettlewell leapt back into the coracle and pulled on the arm.

"Is all well in there?" called a voice from outside. "We're coming in."

"No, stay all hands!" shouted the Inspector, "there isn't the room."

Meanwhile, Kettlewell had recovered more of the man and manhandled the body into the coracle with him. Only the legs were still hopelessly entangled in ropes and the cloak. It took the Inspector's help to retrieve them, though it was not a pretty sight.

The dead man was caked in the mud in which he must have struggled and died, having either fallen or lost his balance as he leapt in and upset the coracle at high tide. Even his mouth was filled with mud. His feet had snagged in a tangle of ropes. Somehow ropes had deftly wound themselves about his handsome boots and caught in the spurs. It must have been a sudden desperate move by Smagge, disregarding any concern for safety, maybe when he realised that his captured prize had been snatched from him, upsetting all his plans. His corpse was 'well tooled up', as the men would say, with knives and pistols under the cloak, the weight of which would have helped to pull him down.

For long moments, as the two men recovered their breath, and as their eyes adapted to the low light inside the wreck, they looked about Lizzie's prison. Too much ingenuity had gone into that floating floor that rose with the tide and stayed dry, there were too many clothes, provisions and amenities for a one-handed man to collect in the time he'd had. This had to have been cross-eyed Jack's place. And all those ropes? Perhaps a rope had not been in its place. Perhaps Stefan had upset a stack of ropes as he brought Lizzie out? They were cross-eyed Jack's ropes that had avenged their former owner when Sam Smagge returned from his night's activities in a rage.

The Inspector turned to Kettlewell: "See if you can find anything personal, any proof of identity other than that of Sam Smagge. That is Sam Smagge you found there, with his missing hand. He's wearing my boots."

"Thought I'd seen them before, I really did," said Kettlewell. His men



had laughed about that episode often enough.

The Inspector started looking around, careful not to trip up on the wobbly surface and the ropes. There was nothing. Nothing specific. They found more pistols and a lot of smuggled goods. One of the pistols had a JH scratched on the handle – Jack Hickweed, cross-eyed Jack’s real name. They took the guns and the clothes someone might be able to identify later. And of course the corpse.

“We ought to leave him here,” one of them said, “he don’t deserve a Christian burial.”

“We’re not taking any goods back this time,” ordered Lizzie’s father. “You haven’t seen any. Take all the brushwood we brought and anything flammable and pour the casks of brandy over them. Add the coracle, too. That ought to make a fitting end to this place.”

The men did as they were ordered, grumbling a little when it came to wasting good brandy and gin.

They were not showing a great deal of respect for the dead man, the way Sam Smagge was bundled into one of their boats once the brushwood had been packed into the wreck.

“May I?” asked Kettlewell Waude, laying a plank from the inside to his boat for a quick exit. Then, on the Inspector’s nod, the storm lantern was flung on the flammable pile of brushwood and alcohol.

The Inspector and his men withdrew a respectable distance, where they waited as flames slowly engulfed Lizzie’s former prison. It took a little while – the wreck was made of traditional oak. Shouts of joy erupted on the small boats as the flames leapt through the ancient wooden hull.

“You know,” laughed Kettlewell, pointing at Sam’s feet, “dem’s Mr Masters’ boots, that got Sam entangled and drowned. That’s justice for you.”

“Ah,” said the Inspector, “but that’s not all. Only cross-eyed Jack knew where my boots were stuck in the mud. He would have come back for them that night. Sam must have stabbed him to get them, and Jack’s hideout and provisions. And all those ropes? They were Jack’s ropes, I’m sure. Jack was known for his love of ropes and his mania for collecting



anything that might serve as a noose. Maybe he thought that if all the ropes of the world were in his possession he could never be hung for his crimes?" With that he became thoughtful and added: "Maybe he snagged Sam here from beyond the grave? It *was* Jack's rope that killed Sam Smagge and pulled him down."

"And your boots," added Kettlewell Waude.

"Ah," the Inspector turned to his second-in-command, "I don't think I'll ever wear those boots again. You're welcome to them, Kettlewell. That might put an end to your jokes."

"Those boots? For me? But they're marvellous boots. A man could go places in boots like that, but I wouldn't say 'no'. Are you serious? Well, thanks. You won't change your mind?"

The Inspector grinned: "There is only one condition: No more of those awful jokes!"

Their work was done. The men rowed silently now, careful not to upset their borrowed little boats, while watching an ancient marsh wreck trying to rival the glowing sun.

It was a beautiful, idyllic day. The leaves of most trees had turned to bright colours of gold and brown, gliding softly to the ground, where silvery threads like spun gossamer strung out between flowers and grasses. High above in the blue a lark that could barely be seen, trilled its joy of life.

"It's an Old Wives' Summer," said Aunt Hilda.

Uncle Jonah told Lizzie the story of the ugly, crawling caterpillar that had laboriously moved away on its many legs until it found a quiet, protected place high out of harm's way, where it changed shape and melted inside. On the outside was a hard indigestible skin, a cocoon that nobody noticed, until one day it emerged again in the shape of a beautiful butterfly. "So maybe, one day, the gargoyles may come alive again too, and fly about and cause havoc," Uncle Jonah said.

Lizzie had not asked her father's permission, nor her aunt's, but she knew she had to confront her fears of the marsh sometime.

That's when she had made an unexpected discovery as she climbed up





on her little cart. There on her seat, she had found a posy of wild flowers. She had received such a posy once before, fresh from the roadside, when she first met Stefan. It had to be from him, something he had left for her to find. He must have known she was going to drive out this day.

So, she had bravely driven out to Brimstone Saltings on her cart with Stubborn and with the deer in close attendance. Spotty had long since lost her spots and was turning into a handsome young hind. "We'll have to find a new name for you, if you stay," Lizzie had joked some time ago, when her father tried to prepare her for the fact that, one day soon, the deer would return to the wild. As would the owl.

Sooty flew in and landed beside Lizzie as she stopped by the edge of the marsh. Since its wing had healed, it spent longer and longer away on its own, sometimes all night.

Stubborn had been freed from its reins. It seemed to only have one wish, or maybe two, to eat and to do as little as possible.

Lizzie had brought her father's spyglass, just in case, and standing on her cart she now trained it to scan the horizon. Suddenly she stopped. A shiver ran down her spine as she focused on a barely recognisable spot out on the marshes, where black curved beams rose from their flat surroundings like charred fingers – or ribs? Some of the charred timbers still met where once a proud keel had lain, that in previous ages had cut through the waves when it was still a floating vessel, long before it had been turned upside down and become a prison. Her prison. What was left of the wreck would not last long now in the tides and the winter storms.

She thought of her mother's tragic death and of her father and his men and a silent, mysterious Gypsy boy who had been there for her just when he was most needed, just as she had helped him when he was in danger. He would have known she needed him, and he would know she was grateful. And maybe...?

She thought of Aunt Hilda and Uncle Jonah and his stories and she realised the love that was in her life, just as the animals with her were living proof. She also thought of a young balloonist who had promised to





show her the land from his elevated travelling viewpoint on high and Mr Mathews and his 'Happy-Go-Lucky' hoy – and the big wide wonderful world that was out there to explore.

The fear that had stalked her since she had been confined among those now charred ribs out there, at last left her. Lizzie put down the spyglass and jumped down from her cart.

Smiling, she hiked up her skirt, turned a cartwheel and decided to look forward to the future.

## The End





# FESTIVAL OF THE GARGOYLES

It is the 18th century and the muddy marshes of the Thames are a dangerous place where ghosts and monsters lurk in the mist, and children must beware.

Lizzie's best friends are her animals and the boys at school tease her. But Lizzie is afraid of no one, not even the wicked smuggler Sam Smagge, who has evil plans for her.

Lizzie befriends Stefan, the mute gypsy boy.  
But how can he help her if he cannot speak?

Soon it will be the night when the hideous stone gargoyles on the church roof come to life and descend to terrorise the villagers.  
Will Lizzie escape in time to rescue the people again?

This is a gripping tale of friendship,  
adventure and a changing world.



£9.99

ISBN 978-0-9570635-1-8



9 780957 063518

KS-428-234



ESTUARY PUBLISHING

[www.estuarypublishing.co.uk](http://www.estuarypublishing.co.uk)